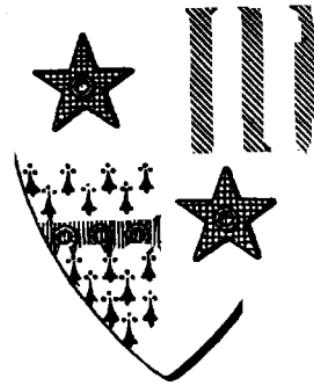
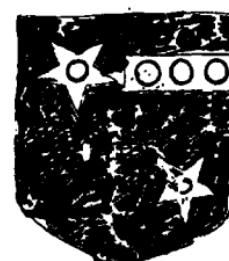


**Assheton
Coat of Arms.**



**Assheton Quartering
Barton and Middleton.**



Brasses of the Black Knight and Family.

VIII.

THE BLACK KNIGHT.

In the following paper I propose (1) to correct an erroneous statement in Baines' History with regard to the old lords of Middleton, for which perhaps the original author was not to blame, but which subsequent research and information which is now available make quite plain. (2) To show the identity of the Black Knight (or Black Lad) of Ashton-under-Lyne, with the first Sir Ralph Assheton, of Middleton, and to relate the means by which he obtained the lordship of the manor, and (3) to make clear and publicly known a point that up to a recent time was only known to a few antiquarian writers, with respect to one of the memorial brasses in the Parish Church, on which there is no name, or date, or inscription of any kind to guide us. After the year 1322, when the last of the original Saxon manorial family of Middleton died, the manor and estates were carried by marriage to the Barton family of Rydale, county of York, in whose family the lordship remained until the year 1438, when Ralph Assheton, a younger son of Sir John Assheton, of Ashton-under-Lyne, married Margaret, daughter of John Barton, and niece of Richard Barton, who was at that time lord of the manor.

In one of the publications of the Chetham Society there is a tradition mentioned which, if it be true, seems to lend an air of romantic interest to this marriage of Ralph Assheton and Margery Barton.

When Middleton Hall was pulled down in the year 1845. "In the ancient panelled dining-room was found a large stone chimney-piece, bearing the date of 1587, at each corner of which was carved a wild boar's head. The tradition of the place is that these heads were in memory of a wild boar which attacked a lady in the early part of the 15th century, who was then the owner of the Middleton Estate, and who narrowly escaped the danger." (*Iter Lancastrense*, p. 31)

In commenting on this, another writer says: "The scene of the alleged incident appears to have been Boarshaw, and the sculptured stone was regarded as a memorial of the lady's wonderful deliverance, though how she effected her escape is not related. Looking at the date of the alleged incident, the lady must have been a de Barton, and probably the lady whom Sir Ralph Ashton married in 1438. If the tradi-

tion be true perhaps there was a bit of romance about the marriage, Assheton having been her fortunate rescuer."

If we take the foregoing in conjunction with another tradition, which is mentioned by Saml. Bamford, the Middleton author and poet, in his "Early Days," p. 30. I think we shall be able to arrive at a reasonable conclusion. It has been noted that the previous writer placed the scene of the dangerous event at a place which is still well-known as Boarshaw. Now Saml. Bamford's tradition is as follows:—"Boarshaw is said to have derived its name from the circumstance of its having been the place of resort for wild boars, one of which, of a remarkable size, having been killed here by an Assheton of Middleton, the 'boar's head' was afterwards adopted by the family as their crest."

Looking through the above again, we see in the first place that a lady who was described as the owner of Middleton was rescued from the attack of a wild boar. In the second place, that it took place at Boarshaw. And in the third place, that an Assheton, of Middleton, is said to have killed a boar at Boarshaw. From the date of the occurrence, the lady could not have been any other than Margaret Barton, and we may reasonably assume that the boar that Assheton killed was the same that attacked her, and that her deliverer was the valiant knight who afterwards married her. It was a deed of derring do, and a way of winning a bride thoroughly in accordance with the spirit of that age, and far more worthy of the hero of Hutton Field than the traditions that have been handed down concerning his later life.

Be that as it may, we have it stated in "Baines' History of Lancashire" (Croston's edition, vol. II., p. 384) that "The Manor of Middleton continued in the Barton family till the year 1438, when it was conveyed by Margery, daughter of John Barton, and heiress of her uncle, Richard Barton, Esq., in marriage, to Sir Ralph Assheton, Knight, son of Sir John Assheton, of Ashton, by his second wife, Margaret, daughter of Sir John Byron, of Clayton." And in the pedigree on p. 396, Margaret is also described as being "Next of kin and heir to her uncle, Richard Barton, of Fryton, in Rydale, county York, and of Middleton, county Lanc."

This is the historical error that I wish to correct.

Our earlier writers of local history may possibly not have had the information which is now available, but this disability can scarcely have existed when the last two editions of

Baines' History were published, and we may, therefore, attribute the above statements in Croston's edition to a too ready acceptance, without examination, of the statements of his predecessors in the editorship of that work. For that Margery Barton was neither the next-of-kin nor the heir to her uncle Richard, and that she did not convey the manor to her husband on her marriage, we shall find abundant proof later on.

But it is desirable here to turn back about half-a-century, for there were certain peculiar matters connected with the subject of the unusual relations between Ralph Assheton and his wife's uncle which call for a few words before proceeding with the general subject of the paper. This is more especially the case, inasmuch as it will bring before our view an important monument which formerly existed in Middleton Church, but which exists no longer, and also because we shall hear of a baptism which took place there more than five hundred years ago, and which is perhaps the earliest record of such a ceremony in that church. This consists of an inquisition for proof of age of the same Richard Barton, Margery's uncle, that we have been speaking of. It tells of his birth in 1386, and of his being baptised in Middleton Church Richard Mallibisse being his godfather and Matilda Fairfax his godmother.

The following are the exact words in the original:—"Ricardus de Barton, 10 Henry IV. (1408-9). In alia inquisitione 10 Henry IV, probatis statis infra scripti Ricardi Barton qui natus fuit apud Midleton die Mercurii prox. ante festum Corpori Christi anno 9 Ricardi II (1396) et baptizatus ecclesia de Midleton. Et Ricardus Mallebisse fuit compater et Matilda Fairfax fuit comater."

This Richard Bartou was a minor at the death of his father, Ralph (the supposed founder of the south chantry in the church), and in wardship of James de Radcliffe until 10 Henry IV (1408-9). He married a lady whose christian name was Alice and from the coat armour which was emblazoned on the two shields of the monument before referred to, and described below, it is very probable that she was a member of the family of Radcliffe of the Tower, and possibly a daughter of her husband's guardian. And as we have, in the baptism of this lord of the manor, the earliest record of the celebration of that rite in Middleton Church, so we have in this monument, formerly existing in the church one of the oldest records of burial (of the same individual), as the following note, taken on the spot more than three hundred years ago bears witness:—

Notes from Middleton Church, made A.D., 1564 to 1598 upon an alabaster stone (2 shields):
 (1) Middleton of Middleton, and Barton of Frys-
 ton, quarterly.

(2) (Argent) a bend engrailed sable (Radcliffe
 of the Tower).

(Underneath these shields.)

Et pro bono statu Alicia inimye (sic) 3 sons, 15
 daughters.

And yet Baines states that his niece was his
 next-of-kin and his heir. At the side of these
 two shields is written: *Hic jacet Ric'i Barton
 armiger et Alicia uxor ei's q' q'deni Ric'us
 obiit Vo die Mensis Novembris a' d'ni 1451.*
 (Hist. Soc. Lanc. and Chesh. N.S. Vol. VI
 (1892), p. 258.)

As I before stated, this is the same Richard
 Barton who was uncle to Margery Barton, the
 lady whom our local historians have hitherto
 erroneously assumed to have been "next-of-kin
 and heir to her uncle." That she was neither
 one nor the other is made manifest by the fact
 stated on his monument that he was the father
 of eighteen children, and by the further fact that
 at his death in the year 1451 he was succeeded
 by his son and heir, Richard.

But how then did Ralph Assheton, the hus-
 band of Margaret Barton, get possession of the
 estates and lordship of Middleton?

Thereby hangs a tale which I will try to ex-
 plain.

In the year 1438 we find Richard Barton (the
 first: there were three Richards in succession,
 whom I will number as 1st, 2nd, and 3rd).
 Margaret Barton's uncle, making a contract
 with Thomas de Assheton for the marriage of
 Margery, daughter of Richard's brother, John
 de Barton with Ralph Assheton, a younger
 brother of Thomas, the reason that Thomas
 acted in this capacity being that their father,
 John de Assheton had died in 1428, ten years
 before.

This contract is dated 15th April, 17 Henry
 VI (1438), and it is recited that between Thomas
 de Assheton, Ralph's elder brother of the one
 part, and Richard Barton de Middleton of the
 other part, "A marriage to be had between
 Ralph Assheton and Margery, daughter of John
 Barton, and said Richard covenants to settle
 £100 per annum, out of his lands on said Mar-
 gery 'in fee.' Richard Barton is sworn on a
 book and the day of marriage to perform it.

Witnesses: Io. Dockenfield, Roger Booth,
 Xfer Hilton."

John de Barton, father of Margery, who be-
 came the wife of Ralph Assheton, married Mar-
 garet, daughter of Sir Nicholas Byron. His
 name appears as a trustee in company with his

brother Richard in 1446, and therefore he must have been living at the date of his daughter's marriage contract in 1458, but he appears not to have been a man of much property, and one reason why the uncle, and not the father, of Margery Barton, was made a party to that deed is obvious in the stipulation that her settlement of £100 per annum was to be a charge on her uncle's lands "in fee." Thus, with the final "swearing on a book and (on) the day of marriage to perform it," may point to a mere craveng for good security, but there is, in certain eventualities a latent power of evil doing in these terms of the covenant which we shall subsequently find was exercised with calamitous results to the descendants of Richard, the uncle.

This Richard Barton, the first, died, as before stated, in November, 1451, and was succeeded by his son and heir, Richard the second, who had to wife Alicia, the daughter of Sir John Byron, of Clayton. He was probably a minor when the heavy charge of £100 a year was laid upon his prospective inheritance, and we find that he followed the example of his father and other landed gentry who, owing to the great rise in wages which set in at the end of the fourteenth and prevailed throughout the fifteenth centuries, were at this period changing their system of agriculture by an increase in the production of flesh meat and wool, in which the cost for labour was proportionately less than was required for the cultivation of wheat and other cereals, and were leasing extra lands for that purpose in the forest of Rossendale, and he next comes before us in the following excerpt:—

"9. Nov. 9. Edward IV. (1465). To Ric Barton of Middleton, Arm and Rad. Barton his son, a messuage, etc., with a vassalry called Wolfandelboth for 12 years, rent £6."

This clearly shows that the second Richard Barton was in possession in 1465. He died before the 17th February, 1465-6, leaving his wife Alicia, who survived him, two sons—Richard, his heir, and Raiph, another son, Thomas having died in his father's lifetime.

John de Barton, the younger brother of the second Richard, and son of the first of that name mentioned in this paper, became Rector of Middleton circa. 1477, and he died circa 1493.

Richard Barton the third, the son and heir of the preceding (the second) Richard, does not appear to have succeeded to his lawful inheritance on the death of his father, in 1466, and it is important to know the reason why. That he was not disqualified by age is clearly shown by the circumstance of his younger brother, Raiph, being competent to act as co-lessee with

their father on the deed just mentioned, and that he was not debarred by illegitimacy is, as will presently be seen, quite certain. But every authority except one (Corry, Hist. Lanc., 1825) who has touched upon this point has entirely ignored the existence of the last two generations of the Bartons, and has assigned the transfer of the manor of Middleton from that family to the Ashhetons to a period and a cause both of which are wrong. The actual means by which Sir Ralph acquired possession of the estates were not of so simple a character as marriage. The first step is quite correctly ascribed to the marriage contract of 1438, but the next and final advance did not follow by the automatic operation of the law on the death of his wife's uncle, as we have seen from the deed just cited. But now we come to another deed which seems to show that Ralph had at least partly achieved his object. This deed is as follows, viz. :—

" 17 Feby. 5 Edward IV (1465-6). This Bill-Indented and made between Raufe Asheton, Knt., and Dame Margery his wife 1st pt. and Alice, sometimes the wife of Richard Barton 2 pt. recites that said Sir Raufe Asheton and Margery have assigned to said Alice certain rents in Co. Lanc., for her Dower, Fryton, in Co. York, and other rents for her Dower in Middleton."

We learn from this deed that the husband of Alice, whom we have found in association with his younger son, Ralph, described as "Ric. Barton of Middleton, arm." (which plainly indicates that he was then in possession of the manor) taking a lease of land on the 9th of the preceding November, had died within the three months following, leaving two sons past maturity and two brothers all living. How, then, can Sir Ralph and his wife be empowered to pose as grantors and to enforce the terms of this deed, which ignores the existence of any hereditary heir, and clearly announces the eviction of the Barton family, not only from their manor of Middleton, but also from their original of Fryton in Yorkshire?

Moreover, it is to be a thorough clearance, and the dower of the widow is to be obliterated from the memory of Fryton and Middleton by the hastening provision of an equivalent rent elsewhere in "Co. Lanc." This eviction and exclusion of the widow's claim from the fief plainly indicates that Sir Ralph at this time purposed establishing his family in permanent possession.

There is only one conceivable explanation of the humiliating position of the Barton family at this juncture, and it is found by going back to the settlement of £100 a year on Sir Ralph's

wife, charged on the lands "in fee," and, considering the probability and the possible consequences of these payments having been allowed to fall into arrear, to realise the burden which they would impose on the lord of the manor, we must take into account the comparative value of money in those days and in ours. I find from a table of salaries paid to public officials in this county in the year 1482 that a charge of £100 a year at that time would be equivalent to an annual payment of £2,000 in these days,* but I gather from Professor Thurold Rogers, who bases his estimate on a wide range of prices, that the proportion of one to twelve is more correct, which would make the annual charge £1,200.

But to convey a better idea of the onerous nature of this annuity to Sir Ralph's wife, I may add that £100 put aside and invested at five per cent., a low rate for the fifteenth century—principal and interest—would in twenty-seven years amount to £5,467 which at the proportion of one to twelve, is equivalent to a sum of £65,604 of this era; and if these payments had been annually made to Sir Ralph, and by him invested as supposed, this latter in the capital sum, which, measured by our present standard of values, would have stood to his credit in February, 1465-6 when he and his wife executed the deed assigning "other rents" to the widow of Richard Barton, in order to get rid of the last vestige of a money charge remaining to the Barton family on the fief of their ancient patrimony of Fryton, and of Middleton. This was the measure of his gratitude for his agreeing with the grandfather of the dispossessed heir to marry Margery Barton in 1438, for I find no evidence that any liability to this inexorable creditor had been incurred by any of the Barton family, except the payments due under this marriage settlement. How much of this gross sum was in arrear we know not, but this we know, that owing to the plague called the "Black Death," in the 14th century (which enormously reduced the population), to the wars in France, and the War of the Roses in England, which were constantly causing demands for men on both sides, as soldiers, the system of villainage, under which a man was bound to the estate and belonged to the lord under whom he was born had ceased. The serfs had become practically freemen, and at a time when wages were at the lowest, the landlords had been obliged to commute the personal services of their tenants for a money payment. But now the decrease in the supply of labour led to an enormous increase in the demands of the men for wages, and the whole of the fifteenth

century was an age of prosperity; wages were excessively high, and the cost of living extremely low. But to the landlord class, who now had to pay to their present tenantry many times over the amount which they were receiving from them in the form of rents in lieu of those same services, when the work of the hand-craftsman of every trade was exceptionally dear, and the prices of all that could be raised upon the land, either arable or pasture, averaged exceptionally low, and were the only source of income to the landlords. It was a period of disaster in every case, and of complete ruin in many, and the culminating phase of these adverse conditions happened to coincide approximately with the period in which Sir Ralph's wife lived in wedlock with him and was a charge on the resources of the Bartons. The grantor of this charge was already feeling the pressure common to his class in those times, and resorting to other methods of husbandry to repair the inroads made by his income, by leasing vaccaries (grazing grounds) in various places. At the time he died (1451) he had been responsible for making these payments about thirteen years, and during the next fourteen years that heavy obligation had fallen on his son, Richard the second, the cousin of "Dame Margery," who had not been a party to contracting it, and had a family of his own dependent upon him.

Upon the third Richard, grandson of the founder of this settlement, the liability to continue the annual payments under it, which from the foregoing statements it is assumed that his father and grandfather had been unable to meet, would now fall, augmented by the interest upon the amount in arrears, and possibly accompanied by a peremptory demand for an immediate payment of the whole sum then owing. Richard was young, inexperienced, and of rural habits. His creditor not long, if at all, past his prime, had consorted with courtiers and men of high distinction in many walks of life, as a youth in the court of a king who was incessantly beset by duns, "a prince whom everyone revered, no one consulted, and everyone who could do so pillaged."‡ He had seen practised, both by debtor and creditor, all the stratagems and evasions permissible within the limits of the law. In any conflict between such an embarrassed heir and such a creditor, who could fail to forecast the result which has been told? In the same year, we find Sir Ralph engaged in a dispute with the Lever family. The estate of Great Lever, at the western extremity of the parish of Middleton, had been held by the ancient family of that name for at least as long

back as the 3rd Edward III. (1329), but in the 6th of Edward IV. (1466) we find—(Baines, by Croston, vol. ii., p. 419. Ed. 1889)—“Sir Rauff Assheton, Knt., suing out a ‘writ of right of ward’ against Roger Lever, of Bolton, gentleman, for the recovery of the manor of Great Lever, in the parish of Middleton, and obtaining judgment at the assizes at Lancaster, by which the manor was awarded to Sir Rauff.”

As to the rights and wrongs of this quarrel we have no certain means of judging, but from the consequences it would seem that the judgment was regarded by the public as an iniquitous miscarriage of justice, possibly brought about by Sir Rauff’s wish to repudiate some previous arrangement between the Bartons of Middleton and the Lever family, and which he trusted to his position at Court to enable him to carry out. We are led to this conclusion by the view that Roger Lever took of the matter, and the action that he and a great number of others took in consequence, related as follows:

“The award given by the court was, it appears, resisted by the defendant, Roger Lever, who, in these lawless times, took with him a great number of his relations and friends, whose names are given below:—John Lever, late of Bolton aforesaid, yoman; Adame Lever, late of the same Towne, yoman; James Lever, late of the same Towne, yoman; John Lever, the sonne of James Lever, late of the same toun, yoman; John Randalffe, late of the same Towne, yoman; Robert Ratcliff, late of Ratcliff, in the seid countie, yoman; Gilberd Lever, late of Heton, in the said countie, yoman; Rauff Mader, late of Mydelton, in the said countie, yoman; Lawrance Coventre, late of Wynwyck, in the said countie, yoman; with many and divers others evell desposed personnes to a great nowmber, many of whom had been outlawed, probably in the contests between the Houses of York and Lancaster, and proceeded from Bolton to the town of Lancaster, where they riotously broke into the Castle, and carried off the record of the recovery. Of this outrage Sir Rauff Assheton complained to the King and to the two Houses of Parliament, on which they ordained that the copy of the record which was annexed to his petition should be of the same force and efficacy as the original, and the justices thereupon awarded execution according to the said recovery. Notwithstanding which, the same Roger Lever, with his aiders and abettors, riotously, with force of armes, defencably in the forme of warre arrayed, that is to saie, with Bowes, Arrowes, Swords, and Bylles, and other defensable wap-

enes, contynuelly duryng the space of V yere, and more, contrarie to the Lawes and peace of oure seid Lege Lord, that is to say, sith the vjth daye of Octobre, the seid xijth yere, not havyng eny consideration or regarde to the seide Recovere, Enbeselment, or Acte, occupied the said Manere, contrarye to the seid Lawes, and to the evell example off the Kynge-our Soveraigne Lord Leiges in those parties; and also dally and nyghtly robbed the said Sir Rauff, his Tenants, and many other the Kynge-Leiges, Kynne, and frendes to the seid Sir Rauff, of theire own propre Goodes and Catelles, and with force entered in their lyvelott and the same despoled.'"

For redress whereof Sir Rauff in a petition to Parliament in 17 Edward IV. (1477) prays that he may have "als many Writte and Writtes of Proclamation as shal be to hym necessarie for the punition of the offenders, contrarie to the said Acte made the said xijth yere to be directed to the Shirreff of the Shire of Lancastre for the tym beyng, commandynge hym by the same to make open, due, and severalle Proclamation, in severalle Merkette Townes within the seid Shire of Lancastre, that is to say, in Lancastre, Manchestr, Weryngton, and Wegan, at severalle Merkette days, within the space of a Moneth next after the delivere of eny such Writte or Writtes of Proclamation to hym so delivered, concerning the premisses or eny of theym, upon peyn of C li: whereof the one half be forfeited to the Kynge's Hyghnesse, and the other halfe to the said Sir Rauf, commandynge the said Roger Lever, and every of the seid Riotours and Mysdoers afore written by the same Writte and Writtes to appere in their propre personnes, affor the Kyngo in his Bench at Westm', at suche day or dayes as shal be conteyned in the said Writte or Writtes, theire to awnesere in their propre personnes to the said Sir Rauf, to every Bille or Billes, Writte or Writtes, as shall be putthenne and their agenst theim or any of theym concerynng the premisses."

To this petition the following answer was returned:—"Be it as desired, with the two exceptions here following:—

This official exhibition of the early manners of some of the higher classes continued for a period of five years, serves to justify the epithet of "rude inhabitants of the county of Lancaster," applied to them a century afterwards by Dean Nowell. (From Baines, by Croston, vol. ii, p. 419).

It may now be advisable to give some more particulars as to the family connections and

career of Sir Ralph Assheton, and to draw attention to the extraordinary and intricate relationship at this period existing between the Barton, the Assheton, and the Byron families, in order to make sure that we do not in some of these discover other causes for Sir Ralph's conduct towards the Bartons which are less repugnant to our sense of justice than the one before given.

Sir Ralph Assheton was the youngest son of Sir John Assheton, of Ashton-under-Lyne, by his second wife, Margaret, daughter of Sir John Byron, of Clayton. He was page of honour to King Henry VI., probably through the influence of his half-brother, Sir Thomas Assheton, the alchemist, who (he and Sir Edmund de Trafford) were engaged in a search for the philosopher's stone) was long engaged in pursuits which gave promise of financial salvation to that impecunious and pitiable King previous to his final deposition by Edward IV. After the accession of the House of York he appears as Knight Marshall of England, and, in the twelfth and thirteenth of Edward IV., as Sheriff of Yorkshire.

The wife of Sir Thomas Assheton, Ralph's elder half-brother, was a Byron; Sir Ralph's mother was a Byron; the mother of Margery, his wife, was a Byron; and, lastly, the mother of the two brothers, Richard, the heir, and Ralph Barton, was a Byron. These maternal Byron ladies are all stated to have been of the Byrons of Clayton, but of what degree of relationship they stood to each other, and its interlacing effect on the consanguinity of their descendants cannot be shown, owing chiefly to the imperfections of the Byron pedigree. But it is certain that no possible bar to succession could be set up as against the brothers of the Richard Barton, who died in 1465-6—William Barton and John Barton, the Rector—in respect of these inter-marriages, and none against Richard Barton or Ralph Barton, their nephews, which would not in an equal measure apply perhaps to Sir Ralph himself, but certainly to his son, Richard, who had a Byron lady for a grandmother on both sides of his parentage.

Resuming the story of Sir Ralph's progress, we find that he obtained the honourable distinction of Knight Banneret for his prowess at the battle of Hutton Field in the 23 Edward IV. (1483), and, later in the same year, after the seizure of the throne by the Duke of Gloucester, as Richard III., he was made Vice-Constable of England, and we are told that his devoted attachment to the House of York was rewarded by Richard III. with the grant of

"divers manors and other possessions belonging to the King's rebels and traitors, Sir John Fogge, Knt., Geo. Browne, Knt., and John Galforde, Knt., on the 12th of December, 1483."

(a).

We also learn from Corry's Hist. Lanc., that "the township of Middleton and the principal part of the parish were granted to Sir Randolph Assheton by King Richard III., A.D. 1483

(b).

I may also mention a reference to this grant which is made in Aikin's Manchester, p. 242.

"The town of Middleton and much the greater part of the parish have long been in the possession of the family of the Assheton's, even previously to the first of Richard III. anno 1483, at which time an extraordinary grant passed to Sir Randolph Assheton as lord of the manor of Middleton."

* Baines, by Croston, Vol 1 p. 54. + Six Centuries of Work and Wages, 1884. ‡ Work and Wages by Thorold Rogers, vol. 1. a Baines by Croston, vol. ii. p. 394, citing Harleian M.S. b Corry's Hist. Lanc., vol. ii., p. 532, pub. 1825.

IX.

The straits to which King Richard was reduced to find support for his usurpation of the crown at the time when this grant of the manor was obtained, would render him particularly amenable to the solicitations of such an old follower and doughty companion-in-arms as Sir Ralph Assheton, who on the other hand, would well know that the King's power would be exercised without scruple as to the legality or consequences of the act, and the deed would doubtless be co-eval with those of the 12th December, 1483.

At this point Sir Ralph Assheton stands before us as a man in declining years; his life's game has been played, and he has won heavily; he has the interests of a large family in mind, and his chief desire now is to safeguard his winnings. But at this juncture he sees a storm arising which threatens to engulf all. A long experience in court and camp has brought home to him that the question, who shall reign over this kingdom, Richard of York or Henry of Lancaster? has not been settled by the usurpation of Richard, but must soon be put to the arbitrament of the sword, and he cannot forecast the result of that final appeal. He had not allowed the misfortunes of his first Royal master, Henry VI., to prevent his acceptance of service and honours under Edward IV., and afterwards under his brother Richard. He would, very likely, then have thrown over, as he afterwards did throw over, the third Richard as readily as he had abandoned the cause of the sixth Henry and the two sons of the fourth Edward, if that would have enabled him to stick fast to those ill-gotten possessions, so recently confirmed to him, and largely increased by Royal grant. But the whole kingdom was in commotion, and splitting up into antagonistic sections. Sir Ralph well knew what fate would befall any who had proved false to Richard should the Yorkist party triumph in the impending struggle; and, conversely, should the Lancastrians win, where could the man who had so lately been raised to high office and gorged with the plunder of the adherents of the House of Lancaster, "for his devoted attachment to the House of York," hope to find safety, either for life or property? With such antecedents and so encompassed at the Christmas season of 1483-4, there was no safe course to be found for Sir Ralph Assheton, by favour of Richard III., Vice-Constable of England.

But he who had transferred his allegiance from Henry VI. to Edward IV., and in the many

changes of fortune of those opposing houses had managed to escape the vengeance of the imperious and implacable Margaret of Aujou, was not quite resourceless at this crisis. He assumed an attitude of neutrality, and made the following adroit movement in favour of a son who was untainted by partisanship and under no obligation for past favours to either of the opposing factions, so that if he himself should fall under the avenging power of the victor in the approaching contest some portions of his acquisitions might be saved to his descendants: "On the 11 January, 1 Richard III. (1483-4), Rafe Assheton, Knt., made a lease to Richard Assheton, his son, of his manor of Middleton, for twenty years next following the date thereof, and the reversion of all his lands in Myddleton, after the death of Dame Margaret Harecourt, widow, Richard Barton and Rafe Barton, to remain to Richard and his heirs for ever, which lands were sometimes the lands of Richard Barton, father of said Richard Barton."

Here we have Sir Rafe himself admitting that the lands had formerly belonged to the second Richard Barton, who succeeded to them in 1451, and I ask, what object, other than the one pointed out, could this deed serve? In January 1484, Sir Ralph Assheton must have been close on seventy years old, and with a valid title and safe tenure "his manor of Myddleton," and the "reversion of all his lands in Myddleton" would in the ordinary course of law and nature, devolve upon his eldest son without warranty of this lease, and in all likelihood before the end of its term. But the reversion was not to fall in until after the deaths of Dame Harecourt, Richard Barton (the dispossessed heir), and his brother Ralph, one or other of whom, judging from the ages of the respective parties, must by the law of chances, have outlived both the lease and the lessee. It is evident that these life interests were not new, but pre-existing grants artfully put forward in this deed to exhibit the munificence of the grantor to his debtors in the hope of affording some little protection to Richard Assheton, the lessee, by implying that any ruthless dealing with the manor would not injure him alone, but put an end to those charges upon the estate which were then the last resource of the living members of the family of its former owner, "father of said Richard Barton."

We may rest assured that Sir Ralph did not owe the ultimate safety of his person and property to such frail devices as are exemplified in this deed, but rather to his natural courage and fertility of resource, strengthened by long use, and sharpened by impending danger. These

would prompt him to keep vigilant watch on the movements of the chiefs of the rival factions of whom some were his neighbours, in particular those of the lord of the manor of Knowsley, and to so comport himself as to turn to his advantage events which immediately preceded and followed the defeat of his master, King Richard, on the battlefield of Bosworth in 1485. But the deed contains two very important admissions, as in its concluding sentence (i.e., "which lands were sometimes the lands of Richard Barton, father of sd. Richard Barton"). Sir Ralph himself here is declaring that the first-named Richard, whom I have previously stated succeeded to the manor in 1451, was "sometimes" owner of the lands of Middleton, and that he was the father of the Richard Barton who, with his younger and only living brother and Dame Margaret Harecourt (who was his aunt), appears as holding a life interest in the manor, which is conclusive as to the legitimacy of the junior Richard before adverted to.

One other point remains to be considered before finally resigning Sir Ralph to the odium inspired by all that has yet been related of his behaviour to the Barton family, and it is this: Is it possible that Richard Barton, who had two sons living, and past their majority before he died, between November, 1465, and the 17th of February, 1465-6, obtained deliverance from his financial troubles by alienating his estate? Putting aside the doubtful legality of such an act, this question cannot be answered affirmatively, for, if so, then why the grant of the manor to Sir Ralph by King Richard eighteen years later? And though the deed was invalid—for it then was and now is a maxim of law that the King can make no grant to the *enfief* of another—yet so long as King Richard held the crown and Sir Ralph his office of Vice-Constable of England, no one would have had the temerity to dispute it, and it did, in fact, under these conditions, embolden Sir Ralph to make his first known appearance and to perform his first-known act as lord of the manor of Middleton in his grant of the twenty years' lease and reversion of that manor to his eldest son, Richard and his heirs for ever, as before stated.

We may, therefore, assign to this date (1483-4), and not to the year 1438, as hitherto asserted the accession of the Assheton family to the lordship of the manor of Middleton. And we may further conclude that this change of lords was not a direct result of the marriage of Sir Ralph to Margery Barton, but was brought about by the indirect consequences of the onerous terms of that union which have dis-

closed in this paper, and based on the invalid grant of King Richard in 1483 having been allowed to pass unchallenged. I am aware that this view is a new one, never having been stated before by anyone else, but I here distinctly invite anyone who can do so to controvert it.

We learn nothing more of the heir, Richard Barton, or of his brother and Aunt Margaret, after this, and what ultimately became of them we can only surmise. Probably they sank to mingle with the commoner stream of human life, in order that those who were better fitted for that venal and turbulent stage of the nation's progress might obtain more commanding positions; but we cannot dismiss from our sight, without a word of sympathy for their unmerited humiliation, these grandsons of the Richard Barton, whose impulsive generosity towards a portionless niece, stimulated, perhaps, by the glamour of her courtly suitor from the King's palace and the great city, had so heavily burdened himself and his successors by the marriage settlement of 1438.

We only know with certainty of one instance in which Sir Ralph Assheton appears in the character of a husband. It is in February, 1465-6, when he and his wife are seen acting in unison disencumbering the fief of Fryton and Middleton of the dower of Alice, the widow of Richard Barton, after the eviction of her sons and herself from those manors. If we credit "Dame Margery" with the ordinary qualities of her social status and sex, we must feel convinced that she was a most reluctant accomplice in this flagitious act, and indeed we cannot acquit her of all blame for it, even if done under duress. At this time her position was as follows:—She had been for 27 years the wife of a man who had brought into the connection nothing of value but his person and his prospects, who had made no settlement upon her, but, on the contrary, had stipulated that she should bring with her an income of £100 a year, not from her father, whose only possessions were personal and of small account, but from her uncle, the lord of the manors of Fryton and Middleton, and made a charge upon his lands "in fee." She must long before this have come to know, with humiliating certainty and self-reproach, that it was not the attractions of her person, but this sordid endowment, which had rendered her acceptable to her suitor, and she who, in the levity of youth had permitted an indulgent uncle to humour her fancy by bribing the cupidity of her lover, now, in her riper years, submits to be made her husband's accomplice in ruining the grandsons of that uncle for

the exaltation of her own sons, only because the wages of her husband's consent to their marriage, so hurtful to true womanly pride, had been allowed, by the pressure of adverse circumstances, and perhaps by the plausible connivance of the creditor, to fall into irredeemable arrears.

The foregoing particulars of the life of Sir Ralph Assheton would inadequately pourtray the faulty side of his character if it not supplemented by a brief notice of other proceedings of his, which rendered him obnoxious in the neighbourhood of his own paternal home, and caused him to be then and ever since remembered with repugnance as the "Black Knight of Ashton-under-Lyne." There can be no doubt of this identification, for the well-known doggerel verse—

Lord Jesu, for Thy mercy's sake,
And for Thy bitter passion,
Oh! save me from the burning stake
And from Sir Rauffe of Ashton—

names the person from whom the rhymester prays to be delivered, and there was no other of that name, either in the house of Ashton-under-Lyne or that of Middleton until two centuries later—the seventeenth century—when General Ralph Assheton, the Parliamentary commander, appears, a man of very different stamp.

"Of all the customs which have come down to us from days of yore there is perhaps none more remarkable than the annual custom of 'Riding the Black Knight,' formerly so popular in the neighbouring borough of Ashton-under-Lyne. This demonstration takes place on Easter Monday, at which time the town used to be crowded by sightseers from neighbouring towns and villages. The ceremony is however, becoming less attractive year by year. As we get further removed from the period in which it originated the tendency to drift from the original conception of the demonstration becomes more evident," and this one has now so far lost all its resemblance to its original condition that for many years it has been a matter of dispute as to who and what was the cause of the custom being established.

"Originally, and in its ancient form, the custom appears to have been for an effigy to have been made of a man in armour, and the image was deridingly emblazoned with some emblem of the occupation of the 'first' couple that were linked together in the course of the year. The black lad was then fixed on horseback, and, after being led in procession through the town, was dismounted, made to supply the place of a shooting butt, and all fire arms being in re-

quisition for the occasion, he was put to an ignominious death." (Glover's *History of Ashton*, p. 84).

"But in the present day the ceremony has lost much of an ancient appearance, for sometimes, instead of an effigy several 'knights' appear in the shape of some thirsty townsmen, who are paraded through the streets, not forgetting to stop at every public-house on the way, when it is expected that the landlord shall contribute a certain well-known measure of ale to slake the thirst of his 'honour' and distinguishable attendants. In the year 1884 there were no fewer than four competitors, who vied with each other for the attentions of the buxom landlady, or the sympathy and generosity of the landlord." (Ibid: Page 109.)

The custom of "Riding the Black Lad" is so well-known as to render unnecessary any further reference to the spectacular part of it, but we may consider the circumstances which have hitherto been advanced in explanation of its origin. Sir Ralph was made Vice-Constable of England in 1483, and Baines says (vol. ii, p. 394) that "It is probable that it was while in the exercise of the odious and unconstitutional functions awarded to him by the tyrant Richard, not in the time of Henry VI. that he became obnoxious," which amounts to this, that it was while he was using powers that were equally odious all over England and only within the two years' reign of Richard III. that he earned for himself himself only in the limited district of his own native place, a reputation so evil that it has been remembered against him from the fifteenth to the present century, which is simply incredible. It is also said that there are traditions against him which point to an exercise of the "droit de seigneur." But this charge cannot be brought home to Sir Ralph, for he never possessed such a "right" as this, which he is supposed to have exercised in Ashton, either in that or any other manor, until he got the grant from the King, of Middleton in 1483, when he would be very much too old, and have few years remaining to him in which to indulge in such criminality, even in the latter township, in which, it may be pointed out, no such thing has ever been alleged against him.

Another authority ("Illustrations of the Customs of a Manor in the North of England," by Dr. Hibbert-Ware) refers the cause of his intense unpopularity to his conduct in the capacity of geld rider over the Ashton estate, an office or privilege conferred on him by his father some time before his marriage. At this period the lands devoted to corn-growing in the district of Ashton-under-Lyne had become

infested with a certain gross-feeding, prolific, and rampant weed called gool, or guld, which bore a yellow flower, and which is now known as the corn-marigold (*chrysanthemum segetum*), which had wrought so much mischief by devouring the nutriment of the grain crops, as well as overwhelming and screening them from the influence of the sun by its exuberant growth, that it had become absolutely necessary to exterminate the pest. Moreover, the wind was an impartial all-round distributor of its seed, hence one man's neglect was a matter of common concern to all, and justice demanded that the evil should be ended by united effort, which was therefore made obligatory upon every farmer by a manorial regulation, to which compliance was enforced by the guld rider, and this official, accompanied by a suitable retinue, at a certain season in every year was commissioned to ride through the fields of growing corn in order to ascertain their state in respect of this weed, and in case of negligence in clearing it out on the part of any of the tenants or other responsible persons, to inflict fines, or such other punishments of a more brutal or degrading character as were considered in those days appropriate to their means, status, or sex, upon every one whom he adjudged to have been remiss, and it is presumed that Ralph performed these functions with rigorous if not criminal severity.

It was an age (Glover's History of Ashton, p. 140):

When lords could hang their serfs at once,
Nor give a reason why.
And ladies loved the tourney most
Where most were doomed to die.

X.

An old tradition runs as follows:—That formerly the lords of Ashton would sometimes, when putting their offenders to death, enhance the punishment and amuse themselves by causing the culprits to be placed naked in casks, the internal sides of which bristled with sharp-iron spikes, and then order them to be rolled down the “Gallows Hill, in front of the hall.” The side of the slope next to the dungeons has, even within memory been known as “Anne’s-Brow.” “It might seem a corruption,” says Illicson, “of Thene’s Brow, as Thene’s Car is several times alluded to in the old rental.” It is now covered by the railway.

But it is popularly alleged that some poor woman, whose surname, if she had any, is forgotten, but whose Christian name was Anne, was condemned to be rolled down the hillside in the spiked cask just referred to.

There are many elements of probability in the hypothesis just mentioned. These excesses would be committed either in person or deputy during a long period, possibly for near upon half-a-century. They would, directly or indirectly, affect almost every member of the industrial community. They were committed in the locality where the custom of retaliating by a mockery of them was afterwards set up and maintained, and this would have been impossible without the concurrence of the lords of the manor, and it is easy to imagine that they would not be against it, for it may well have happened that Sir Ralph’s proceedings in the office of guld rider were not altogether approved by his elder half-brother, Sir Thomas Assheton, but as the former held his office for life there was no remedy. After the death of Sir Thomas, and the succession of his son, and later (in 1484) of his grandson, it is almost certain that to these successive and later lords of Ashton the spectacle of so distant a relative of the half-brother of their late father or grand father, as might happen, coming over from Middleton with a posse of his retainers in full parade to ride unquestioned through the cornfields of Ashton, and to punish by fine or in more degrading ways the tenants and servants of the manor, while they (their lords) might stand by helpless spectators of the proceedings or witnesses of the punishments; all this must have been as galling to the lords as to those of their people who were made to suffer in pocket or in person, and fully accounts for the non-interference of

the successive lords of Ashton with a custom which, from a cursory view, might be regarded by outsiders as a slight upon the family name. But would there be no remonstrance from the descendants of Sir Ralph, the new lords of Middleton? Probably not; certainly none that was ever needed. We cannot suppose that his tenants and the people of that township had received any more kindly usage from Sir Ralph or that they would entertain any greater respect for his memory than their neighbours of Ashton. The underhand means by which he acquired the lordship of Middleton have been overlooked in this present age, owing, perhaps, to the more agreeable occupation of setting forth the merits of his descendants, but the people of his own time and district would have better reason for bearing in mind his own doings.

"Bell's Gazetteer" states that "Sir Ralph Assheton was shot as he was riding down the principal street of the town on one of his Easter Monday visitations, and that the inhabitants took no trouble to discover the assassin." (Glover's History of Ashton, p. 109.) Hence it is supposed that after his death Easter Monday was selected for the celebration of the ceremony.

I may here say that Richard Barton, the dispossessed grandson of Margery's uncle, and his brother Ralph were still living in 1483, when Ralph Assheton got a grant from the King of the Manor of Middleton (Corry's History of Lancashire), and, considering their ages, with every prospect of continuing to live through many years in the neighbourhood of Middleton, among relatives and friends who would unitedly possess considerable social influence, and who could not be expected to allow such a considerable transfer of property and loss of local eminence, in which some of them were interested by consanguinity to pass without comment, or to be speedily forgotten. The Byrons of Clayton, also, alike related by blood both to the Asshetons and the Bartons, cannot have witnessed the rise of one of these families upon the ruin of the other without expositation. But, in particular, there was the Rector of Middleton, Sir John de Barton, who had been presented to the rectory about the year 1477, a younger son of that misguided lord of the manor whose reckless liberality towards a portionless niece had sown the seed of this calamity—at this period (1483-4) the oldest living member of the Barton family, and long afterwards in evidence. The door of every habitation about Middleton from the great hall to the humble cottage, ever open to welcome the honoured and familiar form of "the

Rector," a member of the old manorial family, a life-long neighbour, a pastor among his own flock, whose word could stand against his? In some, perhaps many, of these dwellings the tale of the wrongs of his younger relatives would be told by himself in such fitting language as a long practice of his profession would enable him to command. In others the story would be repeated, possibly with additions. In all it would fall upon the ears of willing listeners, only to be heard with respectful commiseration, and accepted with abiding faith. Such a story, so accredited spreading far and wide, among high and low, would soon reach the neighbourhood of Ashton, where it would embitter the resentment before caused by the severity of Sir Ralph's proceedings in his guild riding. Thus favoured by the well-known, though perhaps in some cases unavowed, sympathy of the relatives and acquaintances of the injured family in Middleton, in Ashton, and in Clayton, and abetted or in no way discouraged by their manorial lords, the more open demonstrations of the tenantry and the general populace of Ashton, in derisive mimicry of the defunct tyrant, "The Black Knight," were left to take firm root, and to flourish in future undisturbed except by the mollifying and obliterating influences of time.

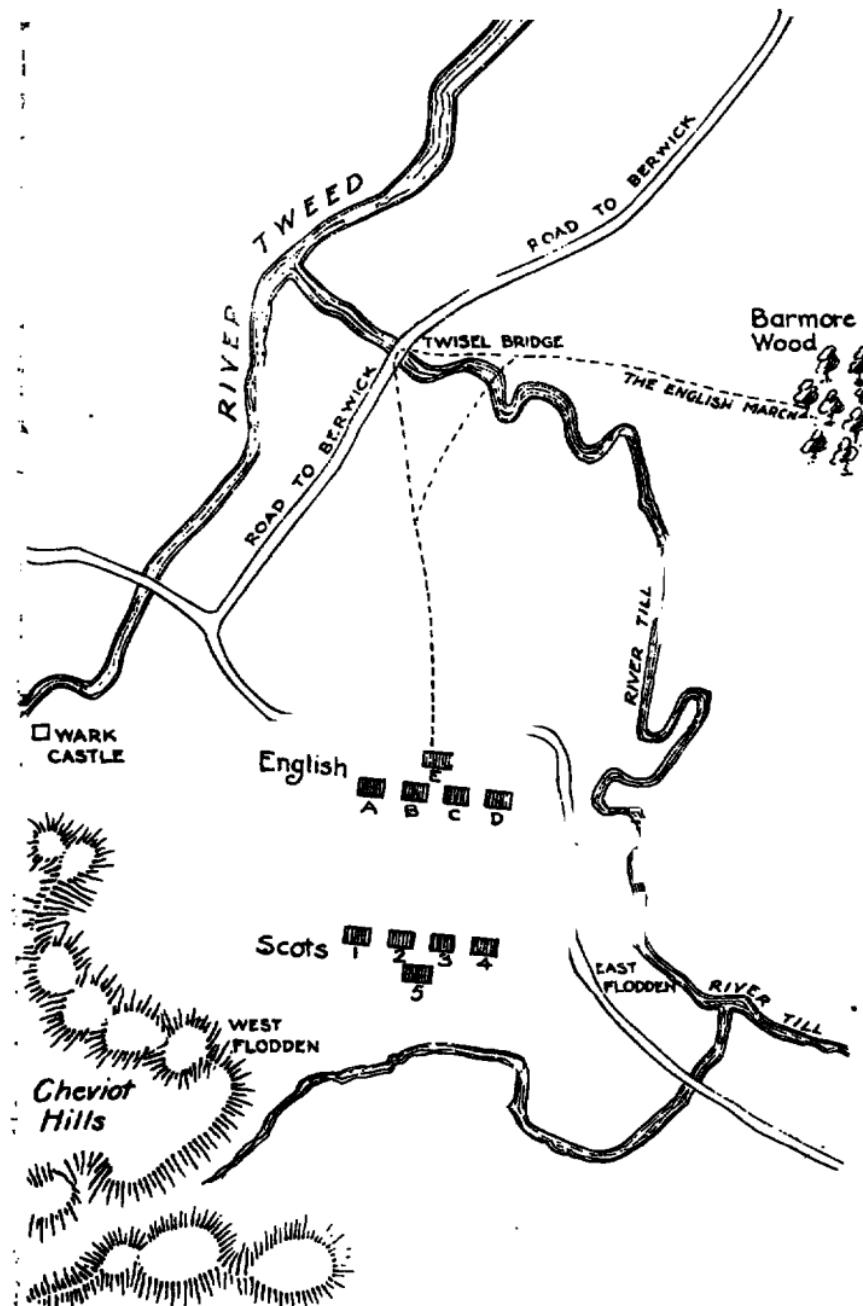
We now come to the Black Knight's brass memorial in the church. It will be noticed that this brass, which is supposed to represent the first Assheton of Middleton, is without name or date, and at the foot of the knight and the lady are placed seven sons and six daughters, whereas in the pedigree in Baines (vol. 2, pp. 396-9) there are only given six sons and seven daughters. These discrepancies between the ordinary and the pictorial records can only be reconciled by assuming that there is a defect in the pedigree, or an error in identifying the brass with Sir Ralph Assheton, for we cannot call in question the facts of the ancient engraver. To uphold the supposed identity we have a brass without either name or date, on which are depicted a knight in plate armour, and a lady whose head dress is of the style known as "dog-kennel." Both the armour and the dress are of the period of the fifteenth century which corresponds with Sir Ralph's period, and the arms on the shield are those of Assheton on the first and fourth quarters, while the second quarter has the fesse and three annulets of the Barons, but the third quarter has been effaced. It will be noticed that the arms are quarterly

(not impaled), and this circumstance has been advanced by some authorities on heraldry as refuting the supposed identification but by others this objection is not considered valid, because it ignores the changes which from time to time have occurred in the usages and rules of heraldry in relation to these particular forms of heraldry. A footnote in Gregson's *Fragmenta*, p. 96, says: "From the time of Edward III. to that of Henry VIII. it was the frequent practice of the gentry to quarter the wife's arms, and if she were of greater dignity of family to place her arms on the first and fourth quarters. This sort of quartering was not esteemed and was therefore discontinued." But perhaps a more direct and reliable way to get at the facts would be to bestow more consideration on those details of the memorial in which there are no uncertainties; for instance, the arms and dress which would be of the fashion prevailing about the period of their sepulture, assure us: (1) That a member of the Assheton family, who died in the honour of knighthood, married a Middleton; (2) that this husband and wife died in or about the fifteenth century; (3) another detail tells us that they had a family of seven sons and six daughters; (4) the situation and character of the memorial affirm that both husband and wife were buried at Middleton. Now we are well certified of the union of Ralph Assheton, who was knighted before his death, and Margery Barton, of the Bartons of Fryton and Middleton, in the fifteenth century, which accords with details 1 and 2, as they were married in 1438. Sir Ralph was certainly, and his wife probably, living in 1485, and we may safely assume that both died before the end of the century. There can be no doubt, although we have no voucher for the occurrence, that both husband and wife were buried at Middleton, which agrees with detail 4, and we have only to face the discrepancy as to the number of their children, which, on the supposition that some died very young, we may reasonably attribute to a defect in the records available to the compiler of the pedigree. In this hypothesis as to the identity of the knight and the lady of the brass we have every fact of time and circumstance in full accord with its story, excepting in one particular, which has just been shown to be of little moment. What have we to set up against it? Absolutely nothing. We have no facts to go upon, and no probabilities to speculate about, as I will endeavour to show. Take the case of the lady. The Barton family first came to Middleton circa 1322, which is an earlier date than the fashion of the dress in which the lady is

depicted on the brass. Can we find, between c. 1322 and 1438, an instance of any lady of that family marrying with one of the Assheton family entitled to bear the arms which appear on the brass who held or acquired the rank of knighthood? Again, did any of the Bartons of Middleton, excepting Margery Barton, intermarry with any member of any of the Assheton families, excepting Ralph Assheton, between 1438 and the assumption of the lordship of the manor of Middleton by the husband of Margery, then Sir Ralph, in 1483-4? And, lastly, is it possible that anyone entitled to bear the arms of the Asshetons, and who died in the order of knighthood, married a lady of the Bartons of Middleton, if any were in being, after that family had been ousted from the manor in 1483-4?

As there is not a scrap of evidence to be found in support of an affirmative answer to any of these primary questions, the minor ones as to the number of children may remain unasked; and in conformity with these statements, which tell as strongly in favour of the supposed identity as they are prohibitive of any other, we may fully acquiesce in the saying of a former writer (editor of "Iter Lancastrense," Chet. Series) that "No inscription was wanted to prove this to be the brass of Sir Ralph Assheton and Margery Barton."

I had purposed to conclude with a brief summary of the character of Sir Ralph Assheton, but considering that he already stands before us quite fully confessed of all that we know to his prejudice by what has gone before, all that is now required to complete his portraiture, and to do full justice to him, is that I should call attention to the adverse influences of his early training in the Court of Henry VI., and the experience of his later manhood in that of Edward IV., than which no other surroundings that we can conceive of would more surely inflame all that was evil, and stifle all that was good in his nature, and to submit his claim for such palliation of his wrong-doing as these associations may be considered to afford. We find nothing against him as a son. As a father he attended to the welfare of his family, and, as we have seen, could spare thought to plan for the succession of his son at a time when there was no safety for his own life. He was an intrepid soldier and an able commander; a man of industrious and energetic habit. But also a man without fear in the present life or dread of a future, for he did not, like many others of his kind, succumb



- A. Howard
- B. The High Admiral
- C. Surrey
- D. Stanley
- E. Dacre

- 1. Huntly & Home
- 2. Crawford & Montrose
- 3. King James
- 4. Lennox & Argyle
- 5. Earl Bothwell

PLAN OF FLODDEN FIELD.

at the end to the terrors of the church, and disgorge a part of his plunder into its coffers in return for a promised smooth passage over the bar "when he put out to sea," but went forth like a bold navigator to face the surf and the "moaning" with all its contraband cargo on board. Nor need we be surprised, considering what we have learned of his doings while living, that no one was found to record the date of his death, or to inscribe on his monumental brass the pious hope that "In eujus anime propitietur Deus," for after a lapse of four hundred years his name and life are only remembered with feelings of regugnance and horror.

It may perhaps not be generally known that the sculptured chimney-piece from Middleton Hall, referred to in the beginning of the above paper, as also a shield from Langley Hall, bearing the arms of the Radcliffe family of Langley (an off-shoot of Radcliffe of the Tower) are now in the possession of the Middleton Corporation, and as these are the only relict now left to us of these historic houses, it is hoped that they will be well cared for.