

## LXV. - FERN HILL.

It is more than probable that the great majority of "Observer" readers have never seen the fine old farmhouse which figures in the above illustration. Fern Hill is to be found by following a path which stretches between Catley Lane (at a point just below the hamlet of Lanehead) and Martin Lane (on the Bagslate side of Norden). If the visitor approaches Fern Hill from the Norden side, he climbs the hill not far from Bank House, and presently passes the old farmhouse known as White Lees. It is worth mentioning that, owing to its elevated position, and lack of high ground in a line southward, a very extensive and far-reaching view is obtainable from White Lees on a clear day. On a clear night the firework display at Belle Vue Gardens, Manchester, can be very distinctly seen. Descending somewhat from White Lees, and next taking a slight incline, the visitor sees before him the stoutly built and quaint old house known as Fern Hill.

Fern Hill was mentioned in the Manor Survey as early as 1569. Nineteen years before the Invincible Spanish Armada weighed anchor and set out for the British coast, the site of the present house was occupied by a quainter predecessor, owned by John Belfield, of Cleggswood, who in that year conveyed it to Ottawell Greve. About 1647 the property passed into the ownership of the Crossley family, a member of which in 1691 pulled down the original house, and built the present structure in its place. Over the doorway of the porch the visitor sees a brief record of that fact in the inscription: "I. M. C., 1691." After being the home of the Crossleys for years Fern Hill passed into the hands of the Chadwicks, who continued to be the owners until about 1800.

No great powers of insight are necessary to see that the immediate neighbourhood of Fern Hill, though somewhat bare to-day, must have been a veritable beauty-spot at an earlier period. The broken ground, and the hill itself would be decked with graceful bracken, above which towered an occasional tree, while here and there, where soil and situation suited, tangled thickets of hawthorn offered welcome shelter to ouzel and throstle. To make mention of ferns calls to mind the important part that beautiful plant played in the realm of folklore. Just as, chronologically speaking, the fern family are among the most ancient of existing plants, so the folklore associations of ferns come down to us from a very far-off past, before the Saxon, and perhaps even before the Roman trod British ground.

In the time of our great-grandfathers many

good folk believed that the root of some kinds of fern had the power to open locks. How much more beautiful a conception is this than the mental picture of a heavy jowled ruffian armed with a jemmy. Other superstitions relative to the fern had special reference to one day, or, to be exact, one particular night in the year—the Vigil of St. John the Baptist's Day. It was not through any association with that Christian saint, for they were along with a whole crowd of other observances of that night survivals of pre-Christian paganism. Speaking of them collectively, it may be said they were carried out on that night in June and also at Christmas, because they marked the two great seasonal turning points in the year—the summer and the winter solstice. It was said that by "watching the fern" in solitude on that particular night one might hope to meet fairy benefactors, and receive a purse of gold.

One of the most important undertakings of that night was the gathering of fern seed. If gathered in strict conformity with the instructions, the fern seed was held to have the power of making the lucky possessor invisible. Two of the conditions were that the gathering must take place at midnight, and the seed had to fall without the plant being shaken by the gatherer. One can imagine some superstitious mortal in the long ago sallying forth at the midnight hour from the old porch at Fern Hill to gather the seed on the dark hillside. Let the reader picture for himself the solemnity of that quest. In the upper chambers the family are wrapped in slumber; in the big kitchen, where a rushlight glimmers, the sheep-dog lies asleep before the expiring embers of the fire. In the outer gloom, glancing apprehensively to right and left, the dark figure steals across the open ground, and then is lost among the inky-black shadows of the ragged hawthorns.

The vivid imaginations of the people of those days populated the countryside with whole tribes of supernatural beings, and after dark the flitting bat and various nocturnal birds were mistaken for boggarts, warlocks, and sprites of various kinds. One person who went to gather fern seed afterwards reported that spirits whisked past his ears, and sometimes struck his hat and parts of his body. He persevered, however, in his task, and only made for home when he felt certain that he had secured a fair quantity of the precious seed. Entering the house he opened with the greatest care the small box he carried. Intense surprise and disappointment were shown on his face—for the box was empty!—A. R.