

Wargrave Local History Society

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Edwin Lutyens and his Two Ladies

The life and work of Edwin Lutyens was the subject of Ron Smith's talk to Wargrave Local History Society in February. Lutyens - the country's foremost architect of his time - was born in 1869 - the 9th of 10 boys in an upper middle class Victorian family of 13 children. His father, Charles, was a professional soldier and portrait painter, who had a large estate at Southcote, Reading (although Edwin was born in London). One of his closest friends was Edwin Landseer. Charles chose him as his son's Godfather - and named him Edwin Landseer Lutyens. The family home was at Thursley, south of Guildford, where he was taught by a governess and his sister - he had no 'formal' education, but in wandering the village made friends with Mr Tickner, the local builder, and learnt about the qualities of materials - wood, stone, cement etc. He also noticed features of local houses, such as triangular gable ends to the roof of an old English hall house - which he incorporated in many of his designs.

At the age of 16, Edwin was asked what he wanted to be - his answer of 'a builder like Mr Tickner' was not thought to be in keeping with his 'class' - and the nearest 'suitable' profession was as an architect - so he was sent to London to train. He was good at drawing - and learnt not only from the head of the firm, but also from others 2 or 3 years ahead of him, such as Norman Shaw and Philip Webb.

One of Lutyens first professional jobs was to design the village hall in Thursley. This had many features that were to become characteristic of his work - the gable roof ends, and walls that went directly into the ground, angled slightly outwards as they did so. As the village grew, the hall was replaced by a larger one, and Lutyens building was converted to a house. Not far away, Tilford village hall, occupies one side of a triangular village green. Lutyens design was very 'functional' - the lower level having a seat for people to watch cricket, a store to keep the equipment, and an upper window suitable to display the score.

Aged 20, Lutyens was invited to Heatherset, the home of Henry Mangles (who introduced the rhododendron and azalea to this country). Mangles had also invited Gertrude Jekyll - then 46 - to advise on the layout of the garden. He realised that every house he designed would need a garden, but he knew nothing about gardens - likewise she realised that every garden she designed needed a house, and so for the next 40 years the two built over 300 houses and gardens together.

Edwin was a very sociable man - light on his feet, full of fun, and a practical joker. Invited, aged 24, to a ball in London, he met Lady Emily Lytton, daughter of the Viceroy of India. She proposed to him - and although originally thought to be an 'unsuitable' match, they married 2 years later. Edwin gave her a cabinet with the initials EL on it, containing plans of the house he would build for her. The marriage was a disaster from the start, and they soon drifted apart - Emily touring the world with her personal guru, and Edwin designing with Gertrude.

Gertrude - born in Bramley, Surrey - moved to London aged 17, and then to Wargrave. The family did not like the house (now Wargrave Manor) they had inherited, so they moved to Godalming, an area for which they had great affection. She was talented artistically, but when her eyesight began to fail, realised she could 'paint' pictures by arranging plants - hence starting garden design. Her parents gave her Munstead Wood to create a home of her own. She wanted to supervise all the work, which took 4 years, so firstly got Lutyens to design her a 'hut' - a fair sized house itself. For the 'house' itself, Edwin designed all the 'details' like window catches, locks and keys as well.

Lutyens work tried to make use of 'local materials - brick if in a clay area, flint if building on chalk, etc. Local examples include The Deanery at Sonning and Folly Farm, Sulhamstead. He also designed furniture for some of the houses, even an oval clock for the New Delhi Library that had hands which varied in length as they moved round.

Victoria Sackville (daughter of Lord Sackville and his Spanish dancing girl mistress, Pepita) anticipated that she would inherit the family home, Knole, near Sevenoaks. However, when her father died, the house passed to the male heir, her cousin Lionel - whom she then married, becoming mistress of Knole after all. He had lady friends in London, and brought one to live at Knole. Victoria could not cope with that, so moved out - and had Lutyens design a house for her at Roedean, another for her guests at Worthing, and yet another in London. Lutyens took Victoria, and her daughter Vita Sackville West to Godalming to see Gertrude Jekyll - Vita thought little of Gertrude's garden, commenting that 'maybe it looks better at other times of year'. Edwin Lutyens, therefore, had 'two ladies', Gertrude and Victoria, who were each 'closer than friends'.

After WW1, Lutyens was in trouble financially, as many of his patrons had died. He got the job designing monuments for the War Graves Commission - insisting that they have no religious symbolism, so that they were acceptable to all. Maybe most famously, he designed the Cenotaph in Whitehall - with the uprights not vertical, but sloping as if to meet 2000 feet above the ground. He also changed the inscription from 'Our Glorious Dead', which the government wanted, to 'The Glorious Dead'. It is also still possible to see a house exactly as Lutyens designed and furnished it - the Dolls House in Windsor Castle. Lutyens died in 1944.
