

WOOLVERSTONE HOUSE

SUFFOLK

BY JEREMY MUSSON

Designed by Lutyens in 1900 as a convent rest home, this is one of his least known works. Recently converted from institutional use into a house, it has been carefully restored.

TUCKED into a bend of the Suffolk coast, not far from the mouth of the Orwell River, is one of the least-known works of Edwin Lutyens, a building now called Woolverstone House (Fig 1). A handsome brick structure, it is comfortable and composed, and a little reserved. There is something sculptural in its presence and it is arranged inside and out with subtle contrasts and surprises.

The house has all the hallmarks of Lutyens's first mature period, beginning in about 1900. The different elements in its composition suggest it has evolved over centuries, yet it has not; nor is the house a pastiche. Recently subject to a major restoration by Charles and Jane Cook, after more than 50 years as part of a school, Woolverstone House remains an excellent example of Lutyens's smaller-scale work. Its conception and detail are related to well-known smaller masterpieces of the same date, such as Tigbourne Court, near Godalming, and Homewood, which he built for his mother-in-law, the dowager Countess of Lytton, as a dower house to Knebworth.

Although always listed in the major catalogues of Lutyens's work, the house does not seem to have been photographed for *COUNTRY LIFE* when the magazine was so assiduously promoting his work between 1900 and 1914. Nor has it been much considered by modern Lutyens scholars. This unjustified obscurity is partly because it was built not as a house but as a convent rest home, for which purpose it opened in 1902. Goddards, built in 1899 as a retreat for single ladies of modest means, was converted to a residence within a decade. The same is nearly true for Woolverstone, which became a private house in 1920; but between 1953 and 1987 it served as a boarding house for the

state school housed at Woolverstone Park.

Woolverstone Park was the estate of the Berners family from the 18th century. Their house, Woolverstone Hall, was built in the 1770s by John Johnson and extended by Thomas Hopper in the 1820s. In 1900, Charles Berners (not to be confused, as Hussey and others have done, with Lord Berners) commissioned Lutyens to design a small conventual 'rest house'. This was to have accommodation for nuns in need of rest or recuperation, and a small school, or 'Nursery School for Industrials', for the education of a dozen girls, either orphans or with only one parent. They were taught at local schools and trained for domestic service.

How Berners, who died in 1919, came to choose Lutyens is not clear, although the architect had already carried out a number of East Anglian commissions, including additions to Stoke College in Suffolk for Lord Loch, the uncle of Berners's wife. *COUNTRY LIFE* had also begun to publish the work of Lutyens in 1900, the beginning of a promotion of his work discussed by Gavin Stamp in *Edwin Lutyens: Country Houses* (2001).

Woolverstone has that quality of 'picturesque solidity' which John Piper and John Betjeman so admired about Deanery Gardens, the house Lutyens built in 1900-01 for Edward Hudson, proprietor of *COUNTRY LIFE*. It also combines vernacular form with Classical formality. There are close echoes of Homewood, Hertfordshire, although Woolverstone is in a less overtly early-18th-century Classical style. The south front has the character of a great tithe barn, but this is broken by two single-storey shallow projections, with 'catslide' roofs cutting in to each side, much like the garden front at Homewood. The composition almost gives the impression of a larger house with wings (Fig 4).

The house is approached through a

tree-lined drive, which must have been planted when the house was built or shortly afterwards. A sheltering, single-storey front court forms an enclosed approach to the house (Fig 3), the entrance of which is in the manner of a cart opening, similar to the entrances Lutyens designed (on a larger scale) for Munstead Wood and Orchards, both near Godalming in Surrey; the red brick used is of a distinctive, flat Roman type, the roof tiles are red clay (the present tiles are replacements,





1—The house from the south. Originally designed as a retreat house for St Peter's convent in Kilburn, it became a single dwelling by 1920

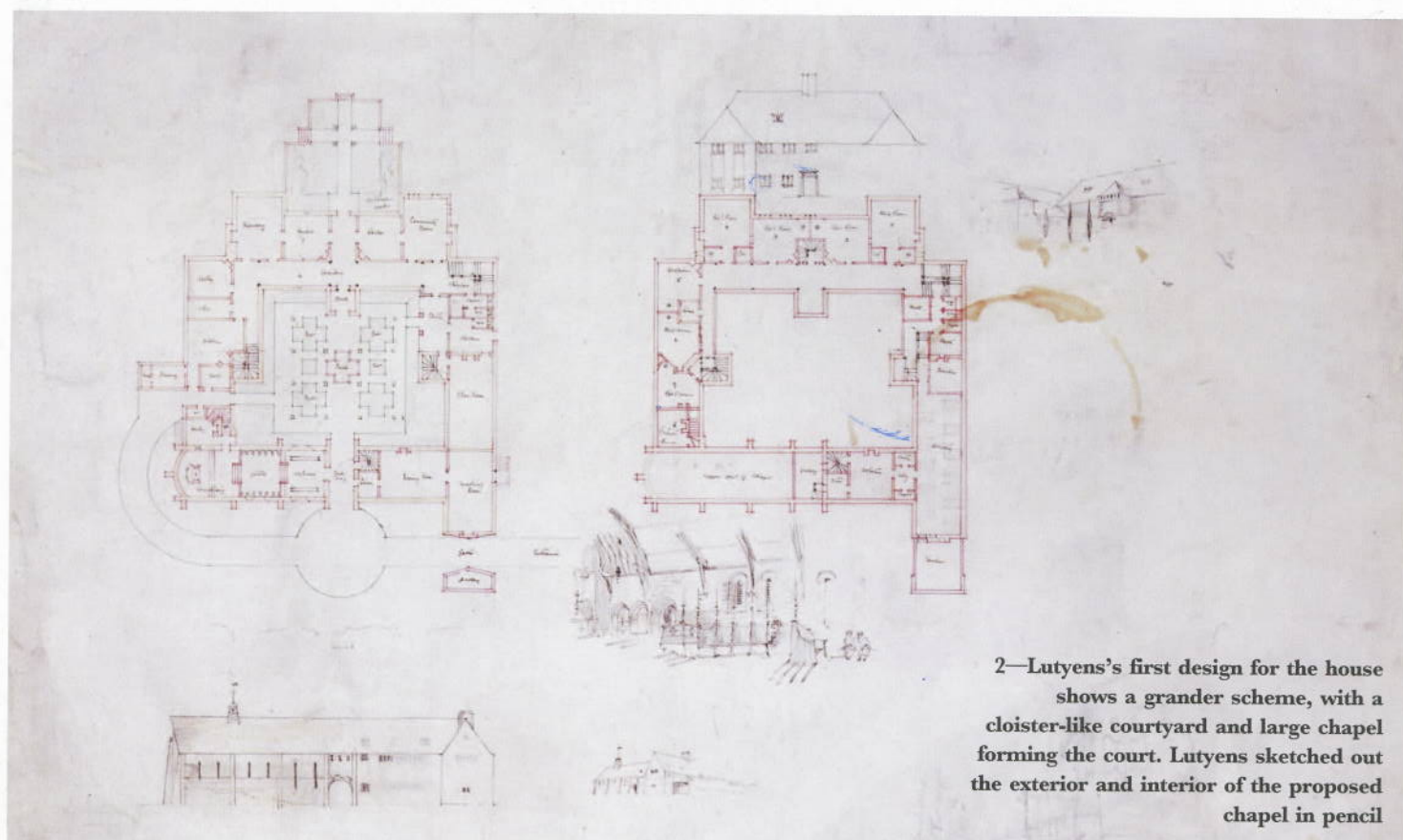
but in the right material). This front of the house rises to a series of three tile-hung gables (Fig 5). The entrance recalls some medieval townhouses, which were approached through small courts, and the courtyard was clearly intended to seem like a cloister.

The main hall-corridor has a series of neat Roman-style cross vaults which create the flavour of an undercroft (Fig 8).

A Mediterranean note is struck by practical but attractive polished dark-red terracotta tiles on the floor. The chapel (now the drawing room) at the east end of the house was entered through an iron screen; the high altar and sanctuary lamps would have been visible along the length of the corridor. The main staircase is opposite the entrance door, and has joinery in the 17th-century manner, rising

eccentrically across the door to the garden and making a grand effect in quite a confined space (Fig 6).

All the ground-floor rooms lead off the corridor and overlook the garden; they have simple, plain chimneypieces. On the first floor are a number of fitted chests of drawers sunk into the walls—a design Lutyens had already employed in Lady Constance Lytton's bedroom at



2—Lutyens's first design for the house shows a grander scheme, with a cloister-like courtyard and large chapel forming the court. Lutyens sketched out the exterior and interior of the proposed chapel in pencil



3—The house from the north-east. The roof to the left is the former chapel. The courtyard is to the right of it. (Left) 4—The house from the south-west: the steep 'catslide' roof gives a remarkable feeling of solidity

Homewood. The windows are leaded, and have oak window sills and frames.

Woolverstone House was always intended to have a homely and domestic atmosphere. It therefore adapted easily to domestic use both in the 1920s and again the 1990s, but its plan was clearly defined by its original function. The single-storey wings of the front court—now flats—provided the services (to the east) and a dining hall for the girls (to the west).

Accommodation for the nuns was provided in a series of medium-sized rooms on the south front; the chapel, which formed a distinct block to the east

with a lower roofline, is today the drawing room. The only internal indication of its original purpose is the window at first-floor level from which mass could be watched from the first-floor corridor. The windows to the garden are later additions, replacing two small lancets.

The house was built for St Peter's community, an Anglican nursing order founded in 1861 at a house in Brompton Square. From 1869 to 1944 the mother house was in Kilburn, in north-west London, and the sisters ran convalescent homes in London, Surrey and Sussex. The community's convent today is at

Woking. Berners was an associate of the community and a trustee and member of their council. As a trustee, he would have dealt with J. L. Pearson, who also designed St Augustine, Kilburn, and the convent in Woking (paid for by Mrs Gibbs of Tyntesfield in Somerset). He first provided a house for the nuns in Chelmondiston, near Woolverstone, in 1892, the year he had inherited the estate.

At the opening on June 19, 1902, the assistant superior recorded: 'The new "House of Rest" built by Mr Berners at Woolverstone was opened and Blessed. The Sub-Warden and Mr Doxat officiated



5—The entrance courtyard. The oak front door is under the central gable of three tile-hung gables

at the ceremony. The Assistant Superior and eleven other Sisters had assembled at Woolverstone the previous day and were “lodged” respectively at Woolverstone Park and the Parsonage. The House of Rest was not finished enough to house anyone, both *damp* and workmen being completely in possession. A most charming conventual building.’

The 1903 annual circular sent to supporters and friends of St Peter’s convent, the *Letter to Associates*, referred to the ‘very pretty chapel and charming garden, and [it] has every comfort possible for tired sisters of various communities’. It remained a retreat house when, after an

outbreak of diphtheria in 1905, it ceased to function as a school. During the First World War, it was used as a convalescent home for soldiers.

After that war, the house was not returned to the nuns, but was leased as a private home, first to a Mr and Mrs Binney. They renamed it the Old Oak House, which illustrates the flavour Lutyens achieved in his design. It retained this name while the home of Lt-Col Sir George Haworth-Usher, Bt. From 1929 to 1937, it was leased by the Hon Mrs Louis Johnstone, who named it Woolverstone House. In 1937, Geoffrey Berners, Charles’s nephew, sold the estate to Lord Nuffield, who

presented it to Oxford University. The university rented it out for educational purposes until the early 1990s.

None of the original building accounts has been traced and there is only the slightest reference to visits to Woolverstone in Lutyens’s correspondence. However, one sheet of designs survives in the drawings collection of the Royal Institute for British Architects, a highly finished red-ink plan for two floors (not as built) (Fig 2). There are two small elevational drawings and a number of sketches in pencil, which are clearly by Lutyens himself. As A. S. G. Butler observed in his work on Lutyens (1950), the architect was



6—The staircase, with robust late 17th-century-style joinery. The door to the garden is to the right

‘an almost unrivalled artist in rough, sketch designs and sketch perspectives’.

The design shown in the drawing has an axial plan of two storeys round a large, formal courtyard. The sketch elevation suggests that the first proposal was seen as a slightly more Classical, neo-Queen Anne building. The entrance was to be through an arch, with the chapel to the east of it. The hall-corridor, running east-west, is part of this original concept. The room overlooking the garden to the east is described on the plan as a refectory; those in the middle as two parlours; and that to the west as a community room. The staircases are not in the positions as built. The school and service wings were reduced to a single storey in execution—whether this was done for reasons of economy or aesthetics it is impossible to tell.

The several sketches of the chapel show a pared-down, buttressed Norman quality for the exterior; the interior is divided into three parts, with a level at the west end for the children, a raised conventual choir for the sisters and yet another level for the sanctuary. It appears from the sketches that it possibly may have been designed round some existing fittings: a Renaissance (or Renaissance-style?) reredos is sketched in above the high altar. However, a photograph of the interior of the chapel taken before 1919 shows no such reredos. Several elements of ironwork visible in the photograph, such as screen gates and sanctuary lamps, were presumably designed by Lutyens, but are now lost.

Margaret Richardson, who wrote the catalogue of the RIBA’s collection of

Lutyens drawings and edited his letters, observes that Lutyens was particularly interested in designing for communal living. In her celebrated account in *House and Garden* (1900), of her house Munstead Wood, Gertrude Jekyll writes that ‘one of the wishes I expressed to the architect was that I should like a little of the feeling of a convent, and how, I know not, unless it be by virtue of solid structure and honest simplicity, he has certainly given it to me’. Could it be that Mr Berners read these words before selecting his architect?

Mary Watts, wife of the artist George Frederick Watts, recorded a visit to Munstead Wood in her diary on April 2, 1898. ‘In the afternoon we went up to see Miss Jekyll in her new house. It is wonderfully simple and good and gives one a conventual medieval feeling.’ As Jane Brown observes in *Lutyens and the Edwardians* (1996), in 1901 Lutyens tried to persuade his patron at Goddards, Surrey, to allow him to enlarge that house on the model of the St Mary’s Hospital, the almshouse at Chichester. He also took infinite pains later in the 1930s when working on Campion Hall, the Jesuit house in Oxford.

Lutyens may not have promoted St Peter’s House himself, as it was one of the projects on which he worked with his ill-fated partner Badcock, whom he fired in 1901. In his 1950 biography of Lutyens, Hussey refers to the house only in passing as a project on which Lutyens collaborated with Badcock. Lady Emily Lutyens described Badcock as ‘not nearly conscientious

7—The double-Z-braced doors leading from the present kitchen and dining room. The dresser is also original



enough or hardworking or businesslike in any way. He is a chattering, conceited cad.' His wife was a lady-in-waiting to Princess Louise, an early patron of Lutyens, and the only client to remain loyal to Badcock, employing him after this date at Cowes. Woolverstone appears on a list of projects in which Badcock gave 'belated assistance' together with Fisher's Hill, Surrey, for Gerald Balfour, Daneshill in Hampshire, and Tigbourne Court, also in Surrey. Although the last is widely admired today, Lutyens at the time blamed Badcock for making 'an awful mess' of it.

Woolverstone House was bought in

1994 by Charles and Jane Cook. Their restoration project, completed in 1997, had to reverse the impact of three years standing empty and half a century of institutional use. They had the builder, W. A. Deacon, remake several doors to match surviving originals, which have distinctive double Z-shaped frames (Fig 7). A brick chimney-piece has been made to Mrs Cook's design for the former chapel, which helps terminate the long vista of the tiled corridor. The house has recently passed to sympathetic new owners, Mr and Mrs Simon Marchant.

The recent revival of the garden, which in 1995 looked like a rough paddock,

has also been a great achievement. Aerial photographs revealed an extensive garden layout in the style of Jekyll. The present garden re-creates some of the lost elements, with rich, cottage-garden-like plantings. A kitchen garden has also been re-created in the walled garden to the west of the house (replacing a prefabricated dormitory block). It is a finishing touch to this happy story, which would have raised an approving smile from both Lutyens and Jekyll.

Photographs: June Buck.

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8—The main corridor. The cross vaulting gives a Mediterranean flavour. The drawing room at the far end was originally the chapel; the new chimneypiece is in the position of the high altar

