

The making of Lutyens

Le Bois des Moutiers, Normandy

One of the best preserved of Sir Edwin Lutyens' houses is about to leave family ownership. Sebastian Cresswell-Turner marvels at this Arts-and-Crafts masterpiece and considers the remarkable personal circumstances that shaped its creation

Photographs by Will Pryce









Fig 1 previous pages: A view of the south front of Le Bois des Moutiers. ← Fig 2 facing page: The entrance porch on the south façade. ↑ Fig 3 above left: Elongated oriel windows on the landing of the main staircase. ↑ Fig 4 above right: The first-floor landing

PUSHING open the discreet gate of Le Bois des Moutiers, I came across a spectacle of such beauty that I thanked God I had not seen it before, for fear that I might have got married simply in order to live there!’ So wrote Mary Mallet of the time when, as a newlywed in 1930, she first visited her parents-in-law in their house near Varengeville, five miles south-west of Dieppe on the Normandy coast.

Today’s visitor is no less astonished. At the end of a long path flanked by broad borders planted in the Surrey style, the extended oriel windows, tall chimneystacks and massive pitched roof of an impressive mansion soar towards the sky. Here in France, almost perfectly preserved and nigh unknown, is one of the finest examples of the partnership between Sir Edwin Lutyens (1869–1944) and Gertrude Jekyll (1843–1932). Furthermore, the family for whom it was built is still there, surrounded by Arts-and-Crafts furniture, much of which was made for their forebears.

It all started in 1897, when Guillaume Mallet, a former army officer and scion of the famous Protestant banking family of that name, and his wife, Marie-Adélaïde (*née* Grunelius), an heiress, also of banking stock, bought a property here. The house—a large rectangular block with a wing at one end and a smaller lean-to edifice at the other—had been built in about 1850. Although entirely undistinguished, it had a spectacular view of the sea, and its position and the lie of the land offered considerable possibilities for the passionate botanist and gardener that Mallet was.

A year later, he met Lutyens in Paris, who was there as architect of the British Pavilion for the forthcoming Universal Exhibition of 1900. This led to a commission to rebuild the

house, with Mallet specifying that the existing structure should be left largely intact.

It was fortunate that the most prominent features of the original building—a tall pitched roof with a double row of dormer windows and large chimneybreasts at each end of the main body of the house—happened to be ones with which Lutyens was entirely at ease. Leaving no external detail unchanged, he incorporated this structure into a design whose imaginative boldness places the house at the heart of his ‘picturesque’ villa work.

On the south façade (*Fig 1*), he added two projections: one an imposing entrance porch with elongated oriel windows (*Fig 2*). These magnificent windows, partly reminiscent of the Middle Ages and the Tudor era, also prefigure the Art Deco style. Other additions

include arrow-slits, buttresses and a portcullis-like entrance in medieval fashion; new windows, whose geometrical variety creates a subtle vertical effect; huge blank chimneybreasts and tall chimney stacks; hipped pagoda-like roofs; and, on the east, a Mannerist projection that Gavin Stamp has described as ‘one of the most exciting and unusual elevations [Lutyens] ever designed’. No doubt for reasons of cost and convenience, Lutyens’ additions and the pre-existing, ugly dark-red brickwork were covered in a lime-and-flint roughcast, which was then whitewashed.

Inside, the same sureness of touch is evident everywhere (*Fig 5*): a sombre and monastic hall in pure Arts-and-Crafts style, with beautifully made oak doors and an exposed wooden ceiling by Morris & Co; ➤



The Mallet family

The first recorded member of the Mallet family of Protestant bankers is Jehan Mallet, who appears in the 16th century as a cloth merchant in Rouen. With its flows of international credit, the cloth trade laid the foundations of the family fortunes, and, in 1713, the Banque Mallet was founded. In the 19th century, this famous institution financed property development, insurance companies and railways. However, the Guillaume Mallet who rebuilt Le Bois des Moutiers did not, in fact, work in the family bank, nor was he rich. It was his wife’s fortune that paid for Lutyens’ work.



a broad baronial staircase with massive pale oak boards, leading up to the first floor past tall, narrow oriel windows (**Fig 3**); and a second staircase lined with turquoise tiles and leading up to a first-floor landing with pre-Raphaelite bas reliefs by Robert Anning Bell set into the walls beside the doors to the bedrooms (**Fig 4**). Throughout the house, most of the original English furniture—much of it designed by Lutyens and made by Morris & Co, with other pieces by Ambrose Heal and W. R. Lethaby—is in place. There is also a large collection of English turn-of-the-century children's literature.

Most notable is the double-height music room, created out of the gutted west wing, with a stucco ceiling probably by George Bankart; a minstrels' gallery with a bold Mannerist balustrade in wood and stone (**Fig 7**); an imposing neo-Renaissance chimneypiece; and, looking out towards the sea, a vast mullioned window incorporating two oriels and 154 panes (**Fig 6**).

The impact of Lutyens' design and of the Arts-and-Crafts workmanship that accompanies it is so powerful that one tends not to notice that much of the original interior—including the basement and the upper floor under the pitched roof—was left largely untouched. For the most part, what we now see is a highly imaginative remodelling of an older structure. For an architect aged barely 30 when work was completed in 1900, this was a creation of astonishing maturity and boldness, and although the style is decidedly eclectic and at times playful, it registers as a coherent whole, with not a hint of pastiche.

At Le Bois des Moutiers, there is a symbiotic relationship between house and garden. From the south and east façades, tile-capped walls radiate like roots to create a series of what French art historian Emmanuel Ducamp called *chambres vertes* or 'green rooms'. Not only does the house rise organically from the garden, with the greenery embracing it, but the garden spaces are an extension of the interior ones. Thus the two stone seats and the yew hedge with its scalloped section at the end of the White Garden mirror the two small closets and the huge mullioned window at the opposite end of the music room.

Southwards, the house faces inland towards formal gardens by Jekyll; northwards, it looks out across a broad front lawn, over acres of luxuriant primeval greenery created by Mallet, and down to a broad stretch of sea beyond. Such progression can only be intentional.

Similarly, the aesthetics of the house mirror the philosophy of Mallet and his wife. As Theosophists, they strived towards the brotherhood of man and the elimination of all differences between races and religions; they were also ➤



→ Fig 5: Sunlight streams in below the minstrels' gallery in the music room



strict vegetarians, and, after the birth of their two children, theirs was a *mariage blanc*. All this is reflected in the sometimes monastic simplicity and starkness of the interior features, and, more mundanely, in the positively spartan bathroom arrangements.

Ardent believer in the purity of mind and soul; longstanding disciple of Morris and the Arts-and-Crafts movement; devoted amateur botanist and admirer of the idealised pastoral scenes of Claude and Poussin, this army-officer-turned-Theosophist-and-landscape gardener intended to create a sort of earthly paradise at Le Bois des Moutiers. It was to echo, perhaps, the landscape in *The Adoration of the Magi* (1904), the tapestry he commissioned from Burne Jones and which, until recently, hung in the music room.

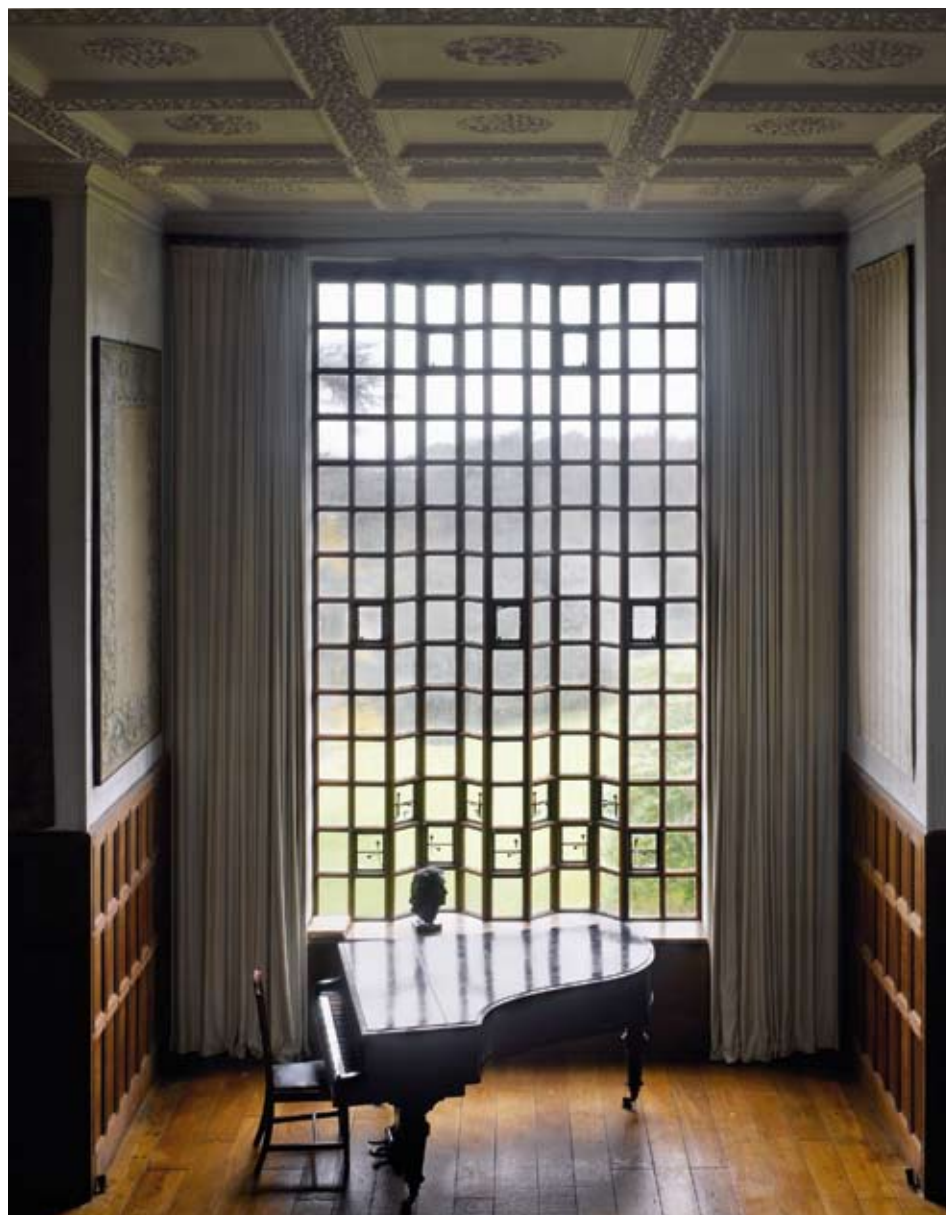
‘It was intended that the architecture and the gardens should work together towards the harmonious development of the spirit’

In the words of the historian Axelle de Gaigneron: ‘It was understood [between Mallet and Lutyens] that the architecture and the gardens should work together towards the harmonious development of the spirit.’

It is something of a miracle that this ensemble has been preserved almost entirely intact. As Mervyn Miller, architectural advisor to The Lutyens Trust, said, the years since the First World War have seen the destruction of many of his houses and ‘have brought increased pressure for alterations and extensions, subdivision of house and garden, “enabling” development within the grounds, and changes of use’. Lutyens’ daughter, Lady Ridley, confirmed: ‘His large kitchens and inadequate bathrooms have inevitably led to desecration and vandalism.’

In this instance, however, Lutyens’ bathrooms perhaps saved the house. The story is told in the Mallet family of how, during the Second World War, the winter cold and the lack of modern plumbing—let alone hot water—in the *pièces d’eau* or washrooms persuaded German officers to look elsewhere for lodging, although the large kitchens were used to feed the soldiers in the batteries in the nearby chalk cliffs. In any case, the house survived the war abandoned but intact, although, for some reason, the Germans took all the delicate iron doorhandles by Morris & Co.

Architecturally, the plans to modernise the house and bring it back to life after the war did more damage than the war itself, especially where the exterior was concerned. In the mid 1950s, a number of Lutyens’ narrow,



↑ Fig 6 above: A sea-facing window in the music room, incorporating 154 panes and two oriels.

→ Fig 7 facing page: The minstrels’ gallery in the music room with its Mannerist balustrade

mullioned windows on the north façade were widened in order to let in more light; on the south façade, his charming round windows were replaced by large rectangular ones for the same reason. It was an iconoclastic move.

Worst of all, a prominent window was made in the large blank south wall of the music room, not only destroying the spatial interplay of the whole south façade, but also eliminating what can only have been a witty allusion to the architect’s own bespectacled face, whose comic possibilities he and others often and happily referred to.

Fortunately, these changes and minor ones inside are all easily reversible, and, in the 1970s, the house and its 25 landscaped acres were listed as *monuments historiques*.

Yet the Mallet family has decided, reluctantly, that it is time to go. Due to the inheritance laws of the Code Napoléon, there are currently 11 owners, and, in the next generation, there will be many more. So the family

is searching for a new owner—private or institutional—who will guarantee proper stewardship of this unique house and garden.

Famously, the fact that Lutyens’ wife, Lady Emily, became a disciple of the Theosophical movement almost destroyed their marriage. It also resulted in her husband being banished from the conjugal bed. Less well known is the fact that it was Marie-Adélaïde Mallet who converted Lady Emily to Theosophy. It seems likely, therefore, that this was a house that Lutyens associated with the breakdown of his marriage—so one that he was inclined to forget.

His reaction to marital crisis was to bury himself in his work. As Lutyens’ biographer Jane Brown has said: ‘It is possible that if he had been happy and fulfilled in marriage, we would never have heard his name.’ So not only did Lutyens give us Le Bois des Moutiers, but perhaps Le Bois des Moutiers also gave us Lutyens. It is an intriguing thought. 🐦

