

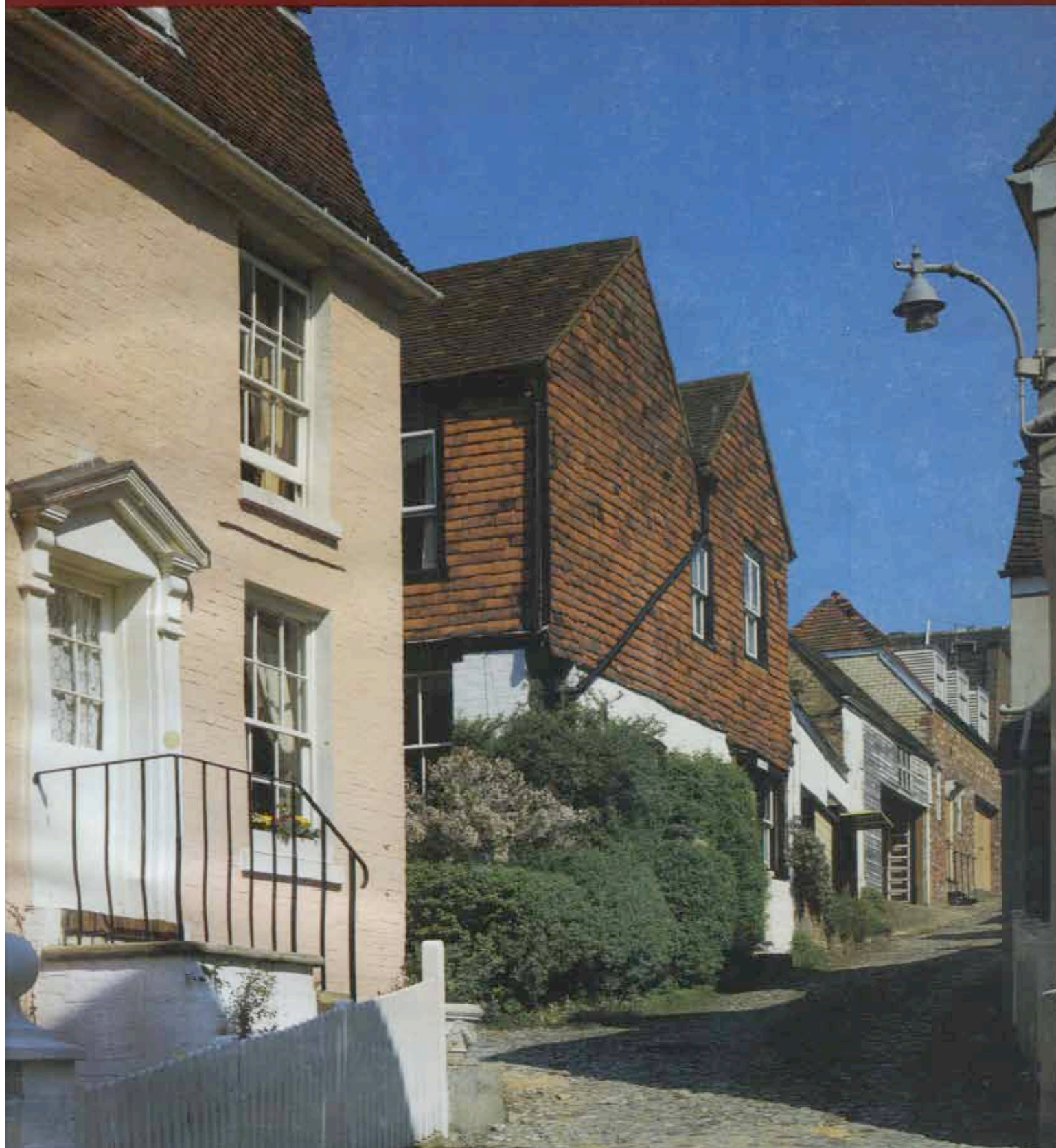
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LE BOIS DES MOUTIERS, NORMANDY—I

THE HOME OF MME ANDRE MALLET AND HER CHILDREN

By CLIVE ASLET

Le Bois des Moutiers, at Varengeville, near Dieppe, was remodelled by Edwin Lutyens in 1898 for Guillaume Mallet, from a French Protestant banking family. The garden was designed by Gertrude Jekyll in about 1904.



1—THE ENTRANCE FRONT OF LE BOIS DES MOUTIERS, AT THE END OF THE GERTRUDE JEKYLL BORDERS. Lutyens created the asymmetrical composition of gables, porch and chimney

DIEPPE has had such a long association with England that it is less of a surprise to find Le Bois des Moutiers at Varengeville, which lies a few miles to the west, than it might be elsewhere in France. It is a very English house. The garden walls of roughcast capped with tiles could have been transplanted from Surrey, and indeed Edwin Lutyens, the very English architect who remodelled the house in 1898, had previously designed similar ones for Orchards, near Godalming. If there is a hint of formality in the path that leads axially to the house, it is denied by the glorious Jekyll borders flanking it, and by the house itself, with its asymmetrical grouping of gables, porch and chimney.

Guarded by four tall cypress trees that have grown up in front of the house, Le Bois des Moutiers only really begins to yield its secrets when you have walked down to the little circular courtyard in front of the porch. Partly hidden by creeper, the curious, many-faceted windows over the porch are less striking today than they were to Jean Cocteau when he visited the house with André Gide in 1913. Describing his sensations in *Le Potomac*, he particularly noticed these thin oriels, puzzled to think what they could give onto inside. The answer is less than the two



2—THE ENTRANCE PORCH AND CORNER ORIELS. "In one of his first major houses, Lutyens spiced the taut vernacular style of Orchards with Art Nouveau elements"

taller (almost obscured by shade and creeper in Figure 2) light the staircase, than that Lutyens, aged only 29, was still experimenting with form.

The house is full of experiments. Had they been pursued, as Christopher Hussey wrote in his *Life*, they "might have transformed the course of English architecture in the Edwardian decade". They were not, but Le Bois des Moutiers was still of crucial importance to Lutyens, if only because it was here that Lady Emily was introduced to Theosophy, the quasi-religion that absorbed her for 20 years.

Lutyens had no truck with the occult. Nevertheless, in Le Bois des Moutiers he created a house that seems almost mystically to gather together many threads from the past. A key to the place lies in the cabinet on the first-floor landing that displays the rich collection of old vestments assembled by Guillaume Mallet, for whom the house was remodelled. The fabrics commemorate the 15th-century origin of the family as Huguenot velvet-makers and *marchands de drap* forced to flee to Switzerland by the Dieppe persecutions. Tradition has it that from the textiles was taken the palette of colours—mostly blues and deep reds—that was used both in the plants in the garden and in the

Burne-Jones tapestry of *The Adoration of the Magi* that hangs over the stair.

Moreover, the Guillaume Mallet who fought with William the Conqueror and buried the body of Harold at Hastings, and from whom the family ultimately traces descent, possessed large estates in the Pays de Caux, including Harfleur. And if Guillaume Mallet was attempting to interweave the past with the present, it is entirely appropriate that research since his day has shown that a Jean Mallet was living at Varengeville itself in the 16th century. Nor should one forget that Proust visited Varengeville—although probably not Le Bois des Moutiers—where his English friend Marie Nordlinger was staying in 1903, and that Varengeville, with its clifftop church, was one of the models for Balbec in *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*.

Last year a reunion of the many different branches of the Mallet family celebrated the 500th anniversary of the arrival of the first Mallet in Switzerland. Mallet du Pan, the pamphleteer and ally of Clermont-Tonnerre during the French Revolution, was born near Geneva in 1749. However, the branch of the family from which Guillaume Mallet was descended returned to France in 1710. By then they became bankers rather than merchants, and the Mallet bank had become part of the Régence de la Banque de France under Napoleon.



3—THE LIVING-HALL WING AND THE ROSE GARDEN. The living hall was Lutyens' major addition to the house



4 and 5—PHOTOGRAPHS SHOWING THE HOUSE BEFORE IT WAS REMODELLED. WITH (below) GUILLAUME MALLET'S SON, ANDRE, AND FRIENDS



Guillaume Mallet was born in 1860. As a Protestant, he had a natural feeling for England, and had been sent to stay with relations in Cornwall during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. The experience awakened his passion for gardens. Returning to France, he entered the French cavalry but resigned his commission in 1896. It was the time of the Dreyfus case and shortly before *l'affaire des fiches*, in which it was discovered that the military authorities were keeping unofficial files on the political and religious beliefs of French officers. Resignation left him free to build a house and a garden. An amateur musician, he wished—perhaps self-consciously—to live surrounded by beauty.

Like Deauville, Trouville and other resorts on the north-west coast of France, Dieppe had become popular with fashionable and artistic society under Napoleon III. Mallet's sister had a house there, and it was while visiting her that M and Mme Mallet discovered the site of their future garden, a deep V of land sloping down to the sea. Monet had painted it only six months before, in a canvas hanging in Rotterdam. Jacques-Emile Blanche lived nearby.

The house that became Le Bois des Moutiers was then called the Mexican House. It stood at the top of the site, looking seawards. Despite its name, it was a fairly typical Normandy villa, albeit the walls were covered in Spanish-style decoration (faintly visible in Figure 4). It was adequately large but not very attractive, and poorly adapted to the life the Mallets wanted to lead.

Several factors lay behind their choice of an English architect to transform it. Mallet wanted to create an English garden on the lines of those he had seen in Cornwall. Perhaps leaving the army had made him especially conscious of being Protestant. Moreover, English architecture was highly regarded abroad at this time: Baillie Scott worked at Darmstadt and Berne; A. N. Prentice had a large country-house practice in Spain; Harold Peto was designing gardens in the South of France.

But it was probably through Mme Mallet, a granddaughter of the German banking family of Grunelius, that the commission went to Lutyens. Mme Mallet's uncle, a diplomat in London, came to know the London *saloniste* Mrs Earle, who in turn was Lady Emily's aunt.

Lutyens had married Lady Emily only the year previously, in 1897. Although Le Bois des Moutiers worked in well with another commission in France, the British Pavilion for

the Paris Exhibition of 1900, he was not entirely happy about it. On the first trip out he felt sadly homesick in Dieppe, having, as he pointed out, already been violently sick in a different sense on the Channel steamer. Happily, the Mallets became life-long friends.

The main walls of the Mexican House survive in the present building. Indeed, on the garden front the solid block of the existing structure proved intractable and Lutyens was unable to incorporate it into a unified design. But the entrance front was transformed into an organic and balanced composition. A new staircase was added in a bay projecting in front of the line of the previous façade. The bay extends over the porch, whose round-headed arches die into round columns without the interruption of capitals. The immediate source for a porch overhung in this way is a house in London, Norman Shaw's 180 Queen's Gate.

From the point of view of the plan, Lutyens' use is somewhat contrived: Cocteau would have been disappointed to find that the oriels above it light a narrow strip of room clearly formed out of



6—THE GARDEN FACADE. The block to the left clearly retains the form of the original house



7—GUILLAUME MALLET, IN HIS GARDEN

left-over space. Yet in its sense of shelter and welcome—qualities that Arts and Crafts architects wished to express in a porch—it is wholly successful, the arches perhaps prefiguring the cloistered entrances of Overstand Hall and Deanery Gardens, both of which Lutyens was soon to begin.

The Spanish-style decorations were hid beneath roughcast. This was a favourite wall-covering for progressive architects such as Voysey, Baillie Scott and, a few years later, Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Analysing *Le Bois des Moutiers* in *Dream Houses*, Roderick Gradidge points out that Lutyens had already worked in Scotland, extending a pub at Roseneath. He was familiar with Art Nouveau work in Glasgow. *Le Bois des Moutiers* was one of Lutyens' first major houses, and in it he spiced the taut vernacular style he was developing at Orchards with Art Nouveau elements. But he would not necessarily have had to go to Glasgow to find inspiration. Mr Gradidge suggests that the oriels may ultimately derive from Norman Shaw's famous Swan House, of 1875, on the Chelsea Embankment, itself inspired by

Sparrowe's House, Ipswich. The tall, battered chimney added to the right of the porch suggests Voysey.

A detail of the original design has been lost on this front. The rectangular windows to the right of the porch were originally round, porthole-like windows, such as that on the west end of the house. They made the entrance hall unacceptably dark and were replaced, their form being remembered in the balls on top of the box hedges at the end of the borders. Lutyens was not above being wilful. Again, Mr Gradidge has observed that what appear from outside to be inglenook windows in the chimneybreast in reality light no more than cupboards.

Lutyens' main addition to the house—although, again, it may have incorporated some of the original structure at ground-floor level—lies



8—THE GARDEN FACADE OF THE LIVING HALL. The tall mullion window (with wooden mullions) is combined with two oriels

at the east end of the entrance front, divided from the rest of the façade by one of the walls that shelter the borders. (These walls were built later than the main body of the house, evidently after Gertrude Jekyll drew the plans for the borders that are now in the Reef Point Collection at Berkeley, California: dated 1904, they do not show walls.) The idea of the sunburst of thin layers of tiles around the archway that leads through to the rose garden in front of the addition (Fig 11) had already been tried at Orchards.

The addition contains what became the main room of the house, a two-storey music room-cum-living hall. A bay with a thin strip of mullion window projects forward to provide an alcove under the gallery on the ground floor, and more space in the gallery above it. With typical caprice, the latter is lit not only by a four-light mullion window but by two small corner oriels, clipped on directly under the eaves.

True to Gothic Revival principles of the expression of function, the living hall has its own roof line, with one of the eaves sweeping down low on the garden front. Projecting in front of the main line of the



9—THE WEST, SERVICE, END OF THE HOUSE. "Art Nouveau yields to Mannerism"

(Left) 10—PART OF GUILLAUME MALLET'S COLLECTION OF VESTMENTS. The family were originally Huguenot velvet-makers and *marchands de drap*

(Below) 11—THE VISTA ALONG THE PATH ACROSS THE FRONT OF THE HOUSE. The sunburst effect of the tiles was used at Orchards, near Godalming, Surrey

building to provide a doorway onto the terrace, the south end of the room is supported on an undercroft-like arch, giving access to the service basement beneath (Fig 8). Above is perhaps the most extraordinary of all the windows in the house. The tall mullion window that one would expect to find in a late-Victorian great hall has been combined with two oriels, so that the surface of the window is no longer flat. As a result, the unusually small panes of glass, divided by wooden mullions, glint like a cut diamond in the sun.

But the greatest surprise is at the west, service end of the house (Fig 9). Art Nouveau yields to Mannerism. The effect is even more remarkable because the materials are vernacular—roughcast, tilehanging, wooden shutters and only a small amount of stone trim. The composition is dominated by the great blind face of the chimneystack: the basic structure, again, survives from the original house, although it has been covered in roughcast, capped with tiles and sculpted at the sides into a Baroque upward sweep. A tiny window lies right at the base. The gable-ends of the two bays projecting forward have been tilehanging at the top. But the tilehanging dips down in a semicircular segment, echoing the *oeil-de-boeuf* window in the basement. The first-floor window is given unexpected stone keystones that crash, Guilio-Romano-fashion, into the strange strip of cornice above them. It was a successful achievement but not one that Lutyens repeated. But it was, to date, Lutyens' most ambitious exercise in architectural form and pointed the way to the geometry of his style in the 1900s.

How did Lutyens achieve it in French? He was no linguist. At first it seems that Lutyens was expected to collaborate with a French architect in Dieppe, one M Doutant, but even Lutyens' command of the language was sufficient for him to write that "*il est une âne* and I should like to tell him so". In the end, he found no difficulty in directly communicating with the workmen. "Made a French joke with immense success with French mason", he was able to report to his wife. "He wanted to do something in stone which belonged to a wood construction—so I said in indignation it was *pour bois!* and added *mais pas pour boire!* Great fits—and I was pleased."

The work that his team did inside the house will be described next week.

Illustrations: Alex Starkey
(To be concluded)

