

The Pleasaunce, Sir Edwin Lutyens, 1897-9 (listed Grade II)

Before work began on Overstrand Hall (1899), Lutyens was already employed in the village turning two seaside villas of the 1880s into one large house called The Pleasaunce. The client was Cyril Flower, created first Baron Battersea of Battersea and Overstrand in 1892 during his tenure as Lord of the Treasury in Gladstone's government. Battersea was married to Constance, daughter of Sir Anthony Rothschild, and was also notable as a collector of Burne-Jones and Whistler.

Deprived of the opportunity to start afresh on the site, Lutyens adopted the solution of disguising the existing villas in a plethora of different architectural elements, forming one of his most odd and perverse designs. As Gavin Stamp put it, the house is 'full of clever tricks and eccentricities and touches of Art Nouveau but, as an overall composition [it is] a disaster.' The diverse elements are nonetheless of considerable interest.

Approaching from the splendid mannerist brick entrance gates, the stables are reached first. These are surmounted by a clock-tower with a pronounced batter, perhaps reminiscent of that of Henry Hare's Westminster College, Cambridge (1899) and very reminiscent of Coates Carter's designs for Caldey Abbey of 1907. Opposite is the main porch, purely baroque, surmounted by a proud carved coat of arms. The porch gives onto an arcade, open on one side, which incorporates Moorish doors. Above this arcade is an interesting rough-cast façade, more like Shaw or Voysey, it has thin oriels which are rare in Lutyens' work but were used again the following year at a French house at Varengeville. These oriels also appear on corners elsewhere at the Pleasaunce. Christopher Hussey comments on these features: 'one of the rare instances in his work of the Nouveau art modernism...another instance of that hesitation in his development which, if pursued, might have transformed the course of English architecture in the Edwardian decade.' The Victorian Society notes produced by Gavin Stamp and Roderick Gradidge included the observation that 'looking at the Pleasaunce, and remembering what was to come, one is rather glad that he did not pursue the development.'

To the right follows a Neo-Georgian façade of three bays, then a chaos of tile hung walls and gables, balconies and bow-windows extending round the corner to disguise the elements of the villas. At last, another Neo-Georgian element appears, followed, finally on the south front by a more typical Lutyens range of the 1900s, with roughcast again and tall chimneys. One delightful element relates the house to the gardens, which were laid out in collaboration with Gertrude Jekyll. On the North West corner an 'octagonal gazebo' echoes another across the upper garden. This second one is at the end of the covered walk which contrasts, in its horizontal regularity, with the disparate architecture opposite. Inside the walk the cross arches are reflected in relieving arches to the ceiling, an example of really good Lutyens wit.

In the interior it is equally difficult to distinguish between Lutyens work and the older villas. The stained glass on the Hall Landing would appear to be earlier but the many Eastern tiles were put in by Lutyens. There are several good fireplaces with De Morgan tiles and Lady Battersea's bedroom is of particular interest with its beaten copper ceiling, unfortunately painted over.

(Adapted by Kathryn Ferry from notes produced by Roderick Gradidge and Gavin Stamp for a Victorian Society visit in c1971. For more information on the Society please see www.victoriansociety.org.uk)