

GREAT DIXTER, SUSSEX

THE HOME OF MR CHRISTOPHER LLOYD

by CHARLES HIND

Correspondence recently discovered at Great Dixter illustrates the significant contribution made to the design of the Edwin Lutyens additions to this romantic house by the owner, Nathaniel Lloyd.

DESPITE the fame of Great Dixter as a garden, not least to readers of *COUNTRY LIFE*, the house is curiously little known except as a backdrop to the plants. Few of the recent books about Sir Edwin Lutyens have done more than mention it in passing. On *COUNTRY LIFE*'s last visit the emphasis was placed heavily on the 15th- and 16th-century parts of the house, rather than on the additions (January 4, 1913). Recent changes at the house and the discovery in cellars and outbuildings of a large part of the correspondence between Lutyens and his client, Nathaniel Lloyd, have prompted a reconsideration of Lutyens's work (Fig 1). Furthermore, Lloyd's own under-appreciated contribution to the building and its furnishings can now begin to be properly assessed.

Lloyd belonged to a group of successful businessmen who, in middle age at the turn of the century, built or enlarged country houses in a relaxed 16th- or early-17th-century vernacular style and filled them with antique, usually English furniture. Edward Hudson, founder of *COUNTRY LIFE* and tireless publicist for Lutyens, is perhaps the best known of them; and the house that Lutyens built for him in 1899-1902 at the Deanery Garden, Sonning, Berkshire, is perhaps the epitome of the style. The influence of Hudson's magazine on the decoration and furnishing of these houses is now acknowledged.

What distinguishes Lloyd from the others is that the process of restoring and enlarging Great Dixter fired him with such enthusiasm for the process of design that in middle age he trained as an architect (he was elected FRIBA. in 1931 at the age of 64). He became known and respected as an expert on the history of English brickwork and the development of English architecture, writing books on these subjects that are still in print. Lutyens's comment that Lloyd was one of his 'aptest' pupils on seeing the latter's design for the Sunk Garden in 1921, superseding his own rather pedestrian layout, is corroborated by Lloyd's entry in *Who's Who*, which



1—The north front of Great Dixter. Lutyens's additions are on the left. (Below) 2—A watercolour of Dixter a few years before it was purchased by Nathaniel and Daisy Lloyd in 1910



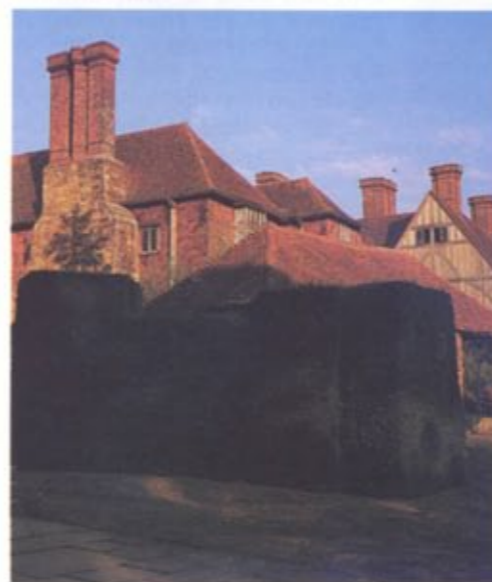
recorded that he 'studied and practised architecture under influence and by suggestion of Sir E. L. Lutyens, RA'.

There is little in Lloyd's background, however, to suggest the future direction of his interests. Born in Manchester in 1867, he came from a comfortable middle-class background. His maternal grandfather owned a department store in Glasgow, a part share of which in due course descended to his grandson. Lloyd's early business career included managing the advertising and printing for the Mazzawattee Tea Co, but in 1893 he founded a colour lithography printing firm. This became so successful

that by 1909 he was able to retire and devote himself to his passions for shooting, golf and before long, his new career as an architect and writer on architectural matters. In 1905 he married Daisy Field, daughter of a successful London solicitor and minor playwright, Basil Field, and the couple rented a late-19th-century villa in Rye, where Nathaniel could play golf at weekends. On his retirement, they began looking for an old house to restore, and the purchase of Dixter and its immediate grounds and farmbuildings was agreed in May 1910, for the sum of £6,000 (Fig 2).

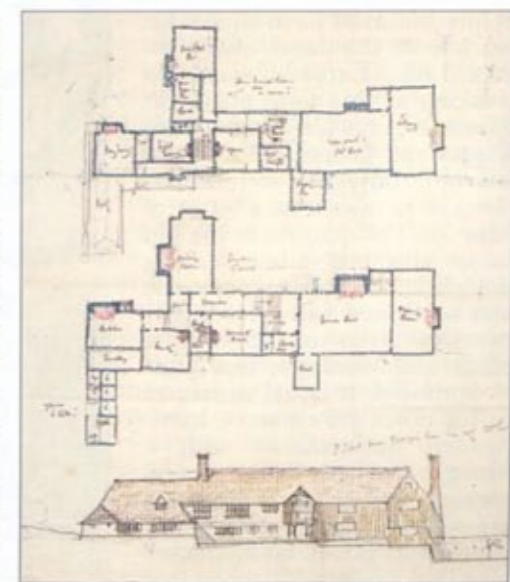
The house was ancient but much altered and reduced by at least a third from its original size. Dixter (renamed Great Dixter when the Lloyds bought the adjacent property of Little Dixter) is first recorded in 1220, but the earliest surviving part of the house, the great hall (Fig 6), probably dates from the 1450s. In 1595 it was bought by John Glydd, who demolished the service quarters, inserted three floors and a huge central chimney stack into the great hall, and divided the present solar and parlour into smaller rooms and attics. He also added a range of rooms against the south wall of the hall, on the site of the present terrace. Glydd's house remained little altered until 1910, by which time it was the property of the Springett family, who kept the shooting but let the house and adjacent farmbuildings. When the Lloyds purchased it, Dixter had been on the market for 10 years, advertised as an agricultural property with farmhouse attached.

Having found their house, the Lloyds needed an architect 'to provide the necessary accommodation of a modern house', while doing no more 'than was absolutely necessary to secure the ancient structure'. A note on the house, written in the third person by Lloyd after 1913, indicated that he approached two men, proposing 'to employ whichever made suggestions he considered indicated the proper spirit in which to carry out the work. The result was that he unhesitatingly chose Mr. Edwin L. Lutyens, paying the other architect's



3—From the east: on the left is a reconstructed 16th-century house moved from Benenden, Kent. (Left) 4—The west end. The garden loggia is one of the surviving farmbuildings. (Right) 5—A version of Lutyens's original design for the house.

fees for the suggestions he had made'. Lloyd's newly discovered correspondence files reveal that the other architect was Sir Ernest George, RA, in whose office Lutyens had trained briefly. George was presumably selected because his son Allen was a personal friend of Lloyd's. Having made his name in the 1870s and 1880s as a purveyor of what Osbert Lancaster aptly christened 'Pont Street Dutch'—red-brick houses on the Cadogan Estate in London—George was now a leading architect of country houses. These have been characterised by Roderick Gradidge as 'honestly built and in various styles,





6—The great hall, dating from the 1450s. (Below) 7—The main bedroom in 1912. The bed was modelled on a 15th-century bed from the Palazzo Davanzati, Florence

but always carefully designed to fit in with the countryside'. His designs for Dixter (now lost, but described in a letter from Allen George to Lloyd) appear to have been characteristically worthy but dull.

Lloyd had not met Lutyens before but must have known his work from the pages of *COUNTRY LIFE*. Lutyens was also working at this time on Great Maytham, only a few miles from Dixter and indeed visible from its roof. Lutyens's determination, as he wrote in a letter of May 10, 1910, 'to make the old house sing out' while making the whole building compose well, was combined with thoroughly practical views on the siting of offices and bedrooms. This clearly appealed in equal measures to his potential client, a hard-headed businessman with a strong, but hitherto little expressed, romantic streak. It was the building of Great Dixter which was to expose this side of his character.

The original sketches that



earned Lutyens the commission survive and show a building markedly different from the present house. He proposed to remove Glydd's early-17th-century subdivisions and restore the great hall and solar to their original proportions. The entrance façade he suggested making more or less symmetrical, centred on the porch. To the east he proposed a long T-shaped range containing reception rooms and to the north of these, not very practically as it would have involved digging deep into rising ground, a kitchen wing arranged round a courtyard. A second version of the original scheme also survives with smaller, more practical service arrangements (Fig 5).

Two things caused the design to evolve rapidly into the form on which work began in the summer of 1910. The first was Lloyd's realisation that the scale of Lutyens's proposals was too expensive. The second was the purchase of a derelict, condemned



8—The solar: Lloyd designed the bookcase on the right; the contemporary furniture is by Rupert Williamson. (Below) 9—One of the radiator covers adapted from old chests

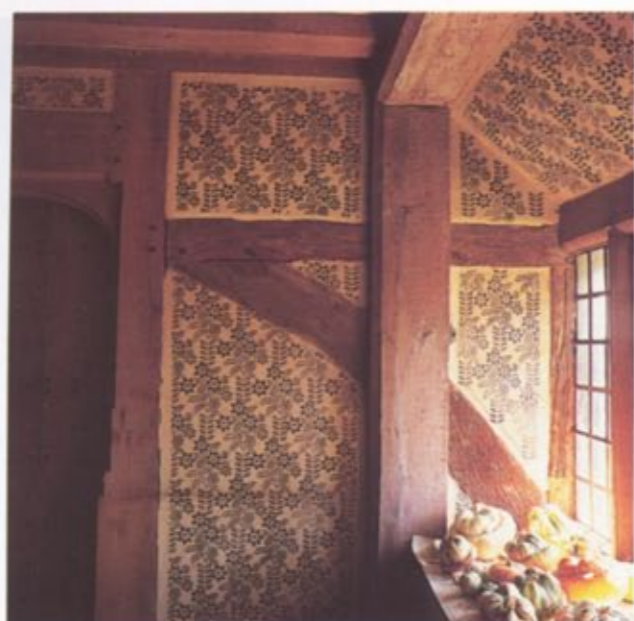
16th-century, timber-framed yeoman's house called the Old House at Home, near Benenden, just over the county border in Kent (Fig 3 and 4). It is clear from the letters that Lutyens and Lloyd had motored round the area together looking at vernacular buildings before Lutyens submitted his designs, and the Old House at Home had caught their eye. Once Lloyd had decided that he could make do with less accommodation, Lutyens suggested acquiring it, which was done at a cost of £75—the value of the old timber. The timbers were carefully numbered, dismantled and removed to Dixter in August 1910.

In all aspects of the restoration Lloyd was keen to ensure that nothing was faked. 'The spirit in which the work has been done may be summed up by saying that nothing has been done without authority, nothing has been done from imagination; there has been no forgery.' From the beginning, Lutyens intended to distinguish his additions from the original fabric by using different materials, brick walls and weather tiling, instead of timber

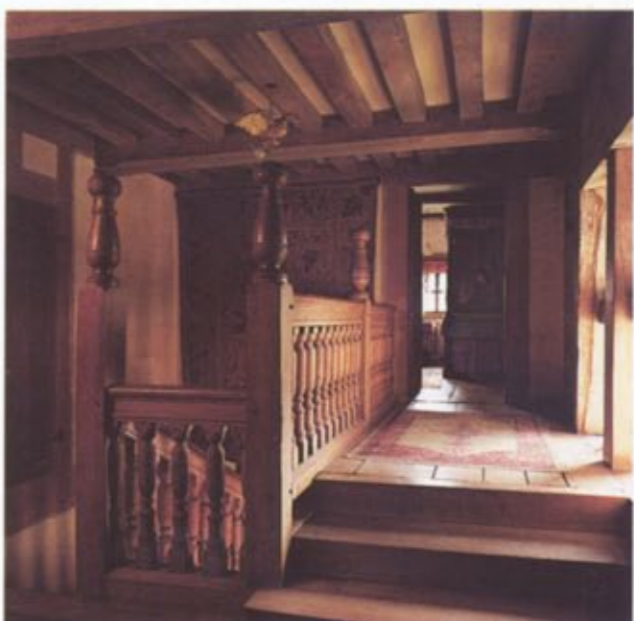
framing, commenting that these were 'local materials used in old world ways'. Thus the new fireplaces and chimneys required for the great hall and what is now called the Yeoman's Hall—contained in the Benenden house—were built within Lutyens's addition to cause minimal disturbance to the old parts of the building. To Lutyens's regret, the original intention of placing the great hall fireplace in the middle of the south wall had to be dropped when evidence was revealed of the bay window on that side. The policy was always to leave things as they were rather than sin by over-restoration.

With great enthusiasm, Lloyd scoured local building yards and forges for old tiles, timbers and window fittings. Where old items could not be obtained, he sought models for new ones nearby (by February 1911 he had sent Lutyens six drawings of local doors) and Dixter contains 12 different patterns of 15th- and 16th-century doors. Only one door original to the house survived, and was placed at the entrance to the cellar under the solar





10—Stencil decoration on the upper landing to designs by Nathaniel Lloyd. (Right) 11—The upper landing looking from the main staircase towards the staircase modelled on one at Hushheath Manor, near Staplehurst



12—The main staircase, model unknown. The lamp is one of many original light-fittings. (Right) 13—The kitchen



stairs. At all stages, whether drains or designs for a hinge were being considered, Lloyd was closely involved and it was more than a form of polite words when Lutyens wrote in a letter to Daisy Lloyd after her husband's sudden death in December 1933: 'I feel pretty privileged having been allowed to help him with his Dixter.'

The original harmony between client and architect became less evident as work progressed, as there are numerous letters from Lloyd complaining about the delays in sending drawings and instructions to the builders, Messrs Norman & Burt, who had worked for Lutyens before. All too frequently it fell to Lutyens's unfortunate chief assistant, Albert Thomas, to make the necessary excuses, such as Lutyens being marooned on Lambay Island by gales. The chief reason was that despite Lutyens's repeated promises that Dixter would have his first attention, he was working simultaneously on commissions in France, Ireland, Italy and the length and breadth of England, and it was almost impossible

to keep up with the work. Unfortunately, the correspondence from July 1911 until January 1913 is still missing so it is impossible to gauge how much further their relationship suffered before the Lloyds were able to move into Dixter in June 1912.

The medieval part of the house provided them with three rooms, the great hall (Fig 6), which was very much a living hall where the family also ate, the parlour and above it the solar (Figs 8 and 9). The Benenden house provided the double-height main bedroom (originally intended to be a dining room) on the ground floor, flanked by a bathroom and dressing room, with the night nursery and a bedroom above. Underneath it and with no external window, is a billiard room within the high brick base necessary because of the fall in ground levels. It contains what appears to be one of Lutyens's characteristic brick and Roman tile chimneypieces, but is actually a precocious design by his new pupil Nathaniel—perhaps his first. Lutyens's new wing contains the kitchen

(Fig 13) and service quarters, with further bedrooms (Fig 14 and 15) and bathrooms above, including a day nursery with his characteristic touch of a 'crawling window' at floor level so that even the smallest inhabitant had a view out. The splendid secondary staircase (Fig 11) is modelled on one at Hushheath Manor, near Staplehurst, Kent. The stencilled wall decoration in the hall and on the first-floor landing (Fig 10) was designed later by Lloyd.

The house was photographed by COUNTRY LIFE shortly after its completion and published in January 1913. The interiors have the rather bare look preferred by COUNTRY LIFE at the time, usually the result of the drastic thinning of the contents by the photographers, but here simply because the Lloyds did not have enough furniture. Bills for Lloyd's purchases of furniture survive from 1890s, and although he lived until his marriage in 1905 in a rented villa in Clapham Park, south London, it is clear that his taste was already formed, and that Dixter simply



14—The north bedroom in the Lutyens's addition. The re-used beam over the fireplace is inscribed '1595 RIM'. (Below) 15—The built-in dressing table in the same bedroom was designed by Lutyens

provided a suitable background for his existing collection.

Lloyd bought at auction and from dealers, mostly in London, Leeds, Harrogate, Glasgow and Dundee, and he was evidently an inveterate visitor to antique shops. An acrimonious correspondence with the firm of Adams, in Edinburgh, regarding a table that he had bought for £16, reveals his attitude as a collector. Lloyd claimed that before despatching the table to him, Adams had restored it. 'You will recollect that I bought the table because it had not been meddled with in any way . . . I do not like a 'freshened up' thing.' Adams denied touching up the table, but refunded his money. The majority of the bills are couched in such general terms ('two Chippendale chairs', 'an old table') that it is difficult to match them to furniture in the house.

For the master bedroom, Lloyd hoped to buy an old bed, and in January 1912 placed an illustrated advertisement in COUNTRY LIFE for one similar to a 15th-century bed in the Palazzo Davanzati, Florence. He was unsuccessful, so had a copy made instead (Fig 7). As this room has been a summer sitting room since the Second World War, the bed has now left the house. A number of simple oak tables,



for example, one in the corner of the parlour on which Christopher Lloyd now writes his articles, appear to have been designed by Lutyens. His only furniture designs in the Dixter archives are for the kitchen dressers, the drawer knobs of which are copied from a 17th-century court cupboard now in the great hall.

Until the sale of part of the contents last year, the house was far more crowded with furniture than it had ever been in Lloyd's lifetime. A large influx came in

1934 from his mother-in-law's house in Putney, which had been furnished largely on his advice. It was not always these later arrivals that were disposed of, and important losses include a fine collection of early Italian maiolica in the great hall and Yeoman's Hall, Nathaniel Lloyd's library of architectural books and a late-17th-century spinet by Stephen Keene in the solar. Nevertheless, Christopher Lloyd hopes to make good some of the gaps by commissioning new work as funds allow. Contemporary furniture by Rupert Williamson—including an armchair and table in the solar which have sometimes startled the visiting public—will soon be joined by other commissions.

After Nathaniel Lloyd's death, his formidable widow, Daisy, lived there until her death in 1972. The gardens became increasingly well known after 1954, when Christopher, the Lloyds' youngest son, took them in hand and opened the nursery. Under his joint ownership with his niece Olivia Lind, Great Dixter continues to receive the loving care that his father was inspired to give it more than 80 years ago.

Next year, Great Dixter will be open daily, April 1–October 5, except Mondays, 2–5pm. Photographs: Paul Barker.