

Summer Outings

Eltham Palace and Rochester

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From the 14th to the 16th century Eltham Palace was an important royal palace, a favoured residence where successive monarchs spent Christmas and hunted in the surrounding parks. However, Eltham Palace was eclipsed by Greenwich Palace and for 200 years after the Civil War it was a farm. By the 1930's the site was almost surrounded by houses and the proposed scheme of Stephen and Virginia (Ginie) Courtauld to erect a large home in the grounds attached to the Great Hall was very controversial. Nevertheless permission was given conditional on the restoration of the Great Hall and the preservation of three 15th century timber gables. Architects Seely and Paget designed a house with an exterior of brick and Clipsham stone inspired by Wren's Hampton Court Palace. Layout has two V shaped wings with the Great Hall attached to one end and a triangular entrance area at the point of the V. The Courtaulds moved into their new house in 1936.

Stephen Courtauld was the youngest son of the family whose fortune was derived from the manufacture of rayon (or "art" silk). He was much affected by service in the First World War and used his considerable fortune to pursue a wide variety of cultural and philanthropic interests. Many

of the rooms at Eltham were designed with specific features to display Stephen's collections and enthusiasms. He was retiring by nature while Ginie, Italian, was vivacious. They looked after Ginie's two nephews and in photographs are often accompanied by dogs plus their ring-tailed lemur Mah-Jongg, or Jongy, who had his own centrally heated cage.

Our party approached the Palace along a shrub-bordered path which led us across the North Stone Bridge, the restoration of which had been a condition for permission to build the house. The main entrance doors were closed to us, but after collecting our hand held guide machines we soon entered the hall. This is so memorable because of its shape which is actually triangular (at the apex of the V) but feels



North Stone Bridge

circular because of the light flooding through the concrete glass domed roof, 7 metres in diameter. The walls are lined with Australian blackbean veneer incorporating marquetry panels featuring the massive figures of a Roman soldier and a Viking on either side of the entrance doors. Both figures are flanked by representatives of world famous buildings combined together into imaginative scenes.

Most of the house furnishings shown have been faithfully reproduced using illustrations from contemporary editions of *Country Life* and from details in the inventory taken in 1939 when many of the items were dispersed elsewhere. Thus in the hall we saw a replica of the 5.8 metre diameter circular rug with its fawn and brown colours chosen to complement the wall marquetry. On the rug stand Swedish club chairs - cream coloured with contrasting piping.

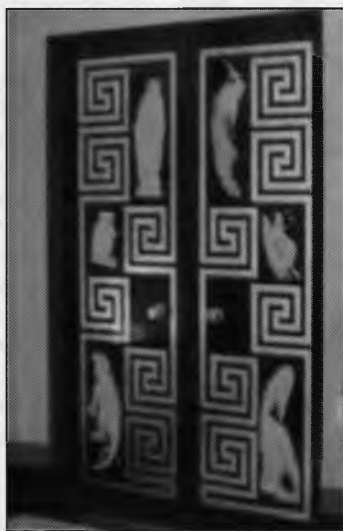
The dining room leads off the hall and these two rooms provide a fascinating example of the style now called "Art Deco" coined as a result of the 1925 Paris Exposition des Arts Decoratifs. At the time the style was "Moderne" and tended to favour geometric shapes rather than the organic forms of earlier "Art Nouveau". It relies on contrasting tones and textures for effect. The huge black doors feature animals and birds applied as ivory coloured raised decoration alternating with panels in a Greek key pattern. An echo of this pattern outlines the

fireplace which consists of polished ribbed aluminium panels surrounding an electric imitation log fire. The real heating came from coils embedded in the ceiling which has a recessed central aluminium-covered portion with built-in lighting designed to make the metal shimmer at night. The dining table and chairs (upholstered in pink leather to set off the ladies' dresses to best advantage) are basic in shape but with cream and brown wood contrast.

Two other ground floor rooms - the Library (Stephen's office) and the boudoir (Ginie's sitting room) both contain ingeniously designed built-in furniture featuring geometric designs and wood panelling. In each case, however, the severity is mitigated by curved ceilings and traditional Persian style carpets.

The Drawing Room is a total contrast yet eclectic. It was designed to display the Courtauld collection of Italian walnut furniture and pictures (now replaced by reproductions). Over the fireplace is Christ

in Limbo by Andrea Mantegna and there are other paintings of the Venetian School. Walls are plain cream but there are richly decorated ceiling beams, a marble fireplace and opulent soft furnishings. In contrast, plaster panels designed in 1935 edge the windows and are based on the premise that all civilisations will eventually decline through decadence. This in a house that features internal telephones, a centralised cleaning system, music piped



Door to dining room

throughout the ground floor and the facility to run 10 hot baths simultaneously.

Two matching sets of stairs, one to the west wing, the other to the east, each lit mainly by a circular window, curve up from the entrance hall to the bedrooms on the first floor. All the bedrooms are en-suite, often with sunken baths. The bathrooms have under floor heating, heated towel rails and are mainly lined with large plain tiles of Vitrolite made from rolled glass. Furniture in the guest bedrooms is built in, using laminated wood with curved ends and horizontal lines reminiscent of cabins in an ocean liner.

Stephen Courtauld's bedroom is aspen lined with block printed wallpaper depicting Kew Gardens on the sidewalls. The shades of blue tone with the blue-green mosaic tiled bathroom. The Venetian Suite, named after its panelling, is splendid, but pride of place must go to Ginie's bedroom situated across the corridor from the preserved medieval timber gables and above the drawing room with its windows on two sides. With its circular ceiling, classical references in the marquetry of the maple lined walls, it appears like a temple, yet has the convenience of concealed walk-in wardrobes. The bathroom has a vaulted ceiling and walls lined with onyx and embellished with black slate disks on to which are set glass spheres. The bath with its gold plated taps and lions mask spout sits within a gold mosaic niche containing a statue of the goddess Psyche. This room is memorable because it has surely been the inspiration for many aspirational yet mass-produced bathrooms ever since.

The house is thoughtfully designed for the maximum comfort of its owners and guests and also for the ten resident servants



The Great Hall

housed in a service wing. It is interesting to reflect that this modern home, rich but not ostentatious, was built and enjoyed during the time of the Great Depression. From 1945 the property was given over to the Army Educational Corps and in 1995 English Heritage took responsibility for the entire site.

The Great Hall, which is the only part of great medieval palace still standing, was built by Edward IV in the 1470s as a dining hall for the court and at Christmas 1482 a feast was given for 2000 people. It is entered on the ground floor from the west wing of the house and the minstrels' gallery (an inventive construction of the Courtaulds) leads from the bedroom corridor. The Hall's most magnificent feature is its "false" (i.e. the posts are morticed into the hammer beams rather than resting upon them) oak hammer beam roof repaired in the 1930s when other antiquarian revival additions were made. These include a raised dais at the far end where royalty would have sat and which

receives extra lighting on each side from the original two double height bay windows. Behind the dais is a carved timber screen commemorating the various monarchs associated with the Hall together with the initials of those responsible for its restoration. Stained glass roundels in the windows, wall hangings and antique furniture and lighting sconces were all supplied by the Courtaulds and they intended the Hall to be used as a music room.

Because the Palace is on a raised area and surrounded by a moat some of our party found sheltered spots for a picnic. However the day was breezy and others ate in the tearoom, formerly the kitchen. Part of the moat is flooded and forms a pond in which massive carp could be seen. It is possible to walk right round the Palace at this lower level, passing through a succession of gardens in a variety of styles and at the same time noticing some of the walls and buttresses of the original palace. One example is the diamond-patterned brickwork above the sunken rose garden which formed part of Elizabeth I's new royal lodgings built in the 1580s. Apparently the Courtaulds were knowledgeable about plants and would have made a real contribution toward the layout and content of their new garden. We were too soon for the roses but admired a long herbaceous border of irises interspersed with alliums and near to the house the wisteria pergola built with Ionic stone columns. There is a second bridge across the moat, made from oak but supported on medieval brick and stone foundations which once formed part of another entrance to the palace. The garden is studded with mature and uncommon trees such as tulip and Indian bean trees and before the war was maintained by 15 gardeners. In the late '30s the gardens were

from time to time opened to the public and used for garden parties in aid of good causes.

An acknowledgement is due to the excellent English Heritage guidebook.

Our party left Eltham at 1.30pm and soon arrived at Rochester where we spent about an hour. For most of us there was a choice between looking at the shops in the High Street and a cup of tea or a visit to the Cathedral. The High Street is mainly pedestrianised and the buildings have been restored and repaired to create a very attractive functioning tourist area. It is noticeable that there are no chain stores. Presumably Boots and M&S lurk elsewhere.

Having spent our hour in the High Street it left a hurried ten minutes for the Cathedral, time only for the nave. The Cathedral is opposite Rochester Castle, a shell and a reminder of the impressive nature of our own castle keep. Inside the Cathedral, at Pat's prompting, we came upon illustrations of these two castles carved upon the tomb of John Henniker who represented Dover in the 18th century. From our limited observation the Cathedral is well worth visiting with its impressive Norman arches in the nave and what appeared to be the remains of medieval wall paintings in the south transept. On the next visit it will be an hour for the Cathedral and ten minutes for the High Street.

Our thanks to Pat for a day which included two most interesting subjects. The day was particularly successful in that we started out just before 8 am and arrived home at 4.30 pm leaving us a full evening. The travelling times avoided the rush hours adding to the efficiency of the arrangements. Well done our Social Secretary!!