



# A hymn to the Arts & Crafts movement

by Clive Fewins



The house from the front

Not everyone likes Arts and Crafts Movement houses. They can be heavy, dark, inconvenient, and in some ways the antithesis of what is fashionable nowadays, because they often lack many of the conveniences that are considered an essential part of early 21st century life.

But time and time again leading architectural critics have referred to Arts and Crafts as the quintessential English style. The reason is because Arts and Crafts houses are always practical and well-built, with a strong emphasis on local materials and vernacular references.

In good examples you will find high quality craftsmanship, both in the execution of the build and in the interiors. At their best Arts and Crafts houses are both original and creative, while at the same time comfortable to live in and well suited to the English climate. Somehow they encapsulate the English way of life. It was these factors that led Nick Monaghan to become an Arts and Crafts enthusiast. An architectural enthusiast, he developed a passion for fine buildings well before he went to university to study history. "I suppose after that my passion for Arts and Crafts houses and furniture just crept in by osmosis," he says.

Nick, now in his mid-forties and the father of three small children, at that stage had no idea that he and his wife Emma would by their early middle age become the owners of the Arts and Crafts country home of a former Prime Minister:

In a ceremony at the end of June this year, the house The Wharf, in the Oxfordshire village of Sutton Courtenay, became the 65th building in the county to have a commemorative blue plaque placed on the outside by the Oxfordshire Blue Plaques Board. The plaque commemorates the fact that between 1912, when he had it built, and 1932, when his widow Margot eventually sold it, The Wharf was family home of Liberal First World War Prime Minister, H H Asquith. The Monaghans bought the listed Grade Two house, which has a long garden that leads down to the River Thames, four years ago. Despite its pedigree it was not at that time a house that would appeal to all families today. It had minimal central heating, a rather dark first floor, and was very run-down and in need of sensitive repair, backed up with much tender loving care.

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"Basically we have been trying to get the house back to its original floor plan before the Asquiths bought the adjoining Walton House, a Georgian building, in 1913," Nick said. "They then joined The Wharf up to it by means of links on the ground and first floors."

The Asquiths commissioned a leading Arts and Crafts architect of the time, Walter Cave, to design The Wharf. Although Cave was a thoroughgoing Edwardian, whose houses were often likened to those of the far better-known C A Voysey, he produced a building that is unusually symmetrical for an Arts and Crafts house. Some experts have dubbed it 'neo-William and Mary'. It has a hipped roof, raised quoins and slightly projecting wings at the Thames-facing rear. Nevertheless, it has tall 'Arts and Crafts' chimneys that are especially visible from the rear; and inside some of the fitted furnishings commissioned by the Asquiths include two sets of bookshelves in the library from the workshop of Ernest Gimson at Sapperton in the Cotswolds.

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The hand-made metal fittings on both are by the blacksmith at the same Cotswold workshop. In addition, all the downstairs floors are original. Nick said: "Arts and Crafts houses were built in many styles. They were not always the informal 'home counties vernacular' houses with large projecting gables that so many people associate with the movement."

In 1913 after the Asquiths bought Walton House, they refurbished it and turned it mainly into servants' quarters. The kitchen of the original house then became a bridge parlour (it is now the kitchen again) and the kitchen transferred to Walton House. Today, now the two houses are separated again, the only part of The Wharf that occupies part of Walton House by means of a special 'flying freehold' is the first floor bathroom, a notable room in its own right because of the highly unusual glass tiles. It has been stated that Asquith signed the declaration that took Britain into the First World War at The Wharf. "I am not convinced of this," Nick says. "He probably signed the ultimatum that Germany failed to heed, and that led to the war, but as far as I am aware there was no Declaration as such."

What Nick is sure about is that Churchill, who describes The Wharf as "a rabbit warren of a house", mainly because of the crowded attic and the servants quarters created out of the adjoining house, stayed many times between 1912 until the fall of the Asquith government in 1917. He probably slept in the guest room overlooking the river at the rear of the first floor. "We can be fairly sure that most of Asquith's First World War Cabinet came here, as most probably did Kitchener and other Army commanders," said Nick.

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The garden leads down to the River Thames. The barn also belonged to the Asquiths, and Margo Asquith, a socialite, used it for overflow accommodation for her many weekend guests



For Emma and Nick Monaghan (inset) renewing but not ruining the kitchen was a major challenge because the rough-plastered walls proved difficult to match and concealing all the electric wires was extremely difficult. The wall-hung cupboards were commissioned from a joiner who made them in a style resembling that of the now defunct Gordon Russell workshop at Broadway, with fielded edges - panels with a raised central flat surface, often with bevelled edges - and random coloured glass lights at the top. The latter resemble work of Arts and Crafts designers of the Scottish school.



The lovely rear facing first floor master bedroom is beautifully furnished in the Arts and Crafts style. It was the room the Asquiths slept in and is now the bedroom of the Monaghans. It overlooks the long garden going down to the river.



The library at The Wharf. It has impressive Arts and Crafts bookcases. The recessed area was originally a passage that went through from the front to the garden. This was part of the 1913 alterations after the purchase of Walton House next door







The Monaghans wanted to remove this room, which is at the front of the house, in order to allow more light in. However this was not permitted because it was felt is contained much original detail, especially the tiles, which resemble those in the bathroom



Another original feature is the hatch between the dining room and the kitchen Emma and Nick Monaghan



The wrought iron lamp outside the front door is a lovely Arts and Crafts piece. The letter A worked into the design stands for Asquith



The main first floor bathroom is unusual in that it occupies part of the adjoining Walton House and belongs to The Wharf by means of a 'flying freehold.' It is thought the unusual glass floor tiles may have come from the Savoy Hotel in London at the time when it was undergoing a major refit in the 1920s

"We also have a photograph of Lloyd George in the garden."

When the Monaghans bought The Wharf it had three large downstairs rooms, as designed by Walter Cave. However, the kitchen had later been divided into three sections. Nick and Emma had the partitioning removed to create one room again. They also made minor alterations to the area at the front of the building where the corridor from late 1913 onwards led to Walton House. On the first floor they gained listed building consent to remove a small cupboard and a maid's closet at the front. This immediately allowed more light in "We also wanted to remove the first floor WC to bring in more light, but this was not permitted," Nick said.

"I think the conservation officer thought it would take away some of the original feeling of the 1912 house." The Monaghans were also advised by their architect, Wallingford-based Richard Cutler, an Arts and Crafts specialist, to leave most of the attic rooms intact, although they gained permission to reduced three bedrooms into two to afford slightly more space for two of the children. "Really what we have done is not major, but it has taken a long time because I am a director of a London based business and we have three small children.

In addition we have done a great deal of the finishing off work ourselves," Nick said Emma spent many hours stripping paint she describes as 'NHS green', and the bright pink paint spread liberally over one of the other bedrooms. They have also spent many hours seeking appropriate furniture and paintings, and today there are pieces from many leading Arts and Crafts workshops, including those of Ambrose Heal, Edward Barnsley, Gordon Russell, and the Robert Thompson workshop in north Yorkshire.

Nick and Emma especially like their high-ceilinged first floor bedroom at the rear. It was the Asquiths' bedroom and overlooks the river. They love the bathroom almost as much, because of the extraordinary vitreous glass that lines the walls, and also some highly unusual floor tiles made of ground and fused glass that are probably contemporary with the house.

Nick and Emma are trying to find out more about these. Their current theory is that they may have come from the Savoy Hotel in London because it was undergoing a major refurbishment in the 1920s. If this was the case then the bathroom postdates the rest of the interior. This would fit in with tying The Wharf in with the adjoining Walton House. Perhaps the bathroom was restyled in the 1920s.

The Savoy Hotel theory fits because it was owned by the D'Oyly Carte family at the time and their country home in the later 1920s was the Arts and Crafts Coleton Fishacre house in south Devon, now in the care of the National Trust. Nick said: "Very similar tiles are to be found in some of the bathrooms there. When we spoke to the conservator at Coleton Fishacre we were told that it was believed that the tiles were taken from the Savoy during a period of restoration. "But this is conjecture. We still don't know for sure where the glass was made, although an expert I consulted at the Victorian and Albert Museum suggests Whitefriars Glass in London.

"We have really come to love this house. It is so well-built and individual in its style. With the help of Richard Cutler we have tried to respect this tradition and to reinvigorate the house - to repair, but not to update unnecessarily. For example we have left - and in some cases reinstated - the original rough plain white plastering. I believe this was perceived in 1912 as a means of creating a clean, clear interior that was very much a reaction to the Victorian approach to interiors." Where they have done some updating, for example in the kitchen, which plays a very large part in family life, Nick and Emma have been meticulous in

trying to work in sympathy with the style of the house. The kitchen cupboards were commissioned from a joiner who made them in a style resembling that of the now defunct Gordon Russell workshop at Broadway, Worcestershire. The cupboards have fielded panels - a raised central flat surface with bevelled edges - and contain random coloured glass lights at the top. The latter resemble the work of Arts and Crafts designers of the Scottish school.

"When we sit as a family and eat in the kitchen it is amazing to think that the small doorway that now leads to the terrace was a pantry, but before that the telephone room of H H Asquith," Nick says. "It was in this room that he took the telephone calls that told him of the sinking of the Titanic in 1912, regular calls on the progress of World War One, and in which, in all probability, received the news of his son's death on the The Somme in 1916. It was this that ultimately led to his resignation. "We both feel that we are very privileged to live in this house." 🌿