# The Great Game: The Classical Architecture of Sir Edwin Lutyens

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Abstract: Sir Edwin Lutyens (1869-1944) (Fig. 1) was one of the most inventive and prolific Classical architects in Britain in the twentieth century, and his work is now much admired around the world. To understand his mature buildings, how they were conceived, detailed and executed, one needs to understand the man, and the story of his evolution as an architect. This paper explains that journey. From his unusual education in his youth, and the Arts and Crafts Movement into which as a young architect he was born; his early integration of Classical details within vernacular designs; his 'Wrenaissance' (increasing fascination with the work of Sir Christopher Wren [1632-1723]) and his evolution into full blown canonical Classical designs, and then the final flowering into abstract Classicism and the style that he was to make his own.

Keywords: Classicism, 'Wrenaissance', Palladio, Ruskin, Pugin, Inigo Jones, Wren.

In the latter half of nineteenth-century Britain, the Gothic Revival was well underway. Fuelled by the writings of Augusutus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-52) and John Ruskin (1819-1900), it was a reaction against the rapid industrialisation and urbanisation of the country and a return to a simpler, decent life, where craft was properly valued, all rooted in the idealised values of religious communities of medieval England. Architecture was perceived as the 'mother of the arts', and offered opportunities for architects, craftsmen, and artists to collaborate. At a time of rampant colonialism, Gothic was also heralded as a national style; a beacon of Britishness in a rapidly changing world. In the 1880s a group of young architects from the office of Richard Norman Shaw (1831-1912), founded the Art Workers Guild (AWG).

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*Fig.1. Sir Edwin Landseer Lutyens. Mezzotint (Lawrence Josset) of an oil painting by Meredith Frampton. Author's print. © Art Workers' Guild.*

Influenced by the writings of Ruskin, Pugin, and William Morris (1834-96), the AWG was intended to help practicing architects, artists, and craftsmen, to come together to support each other and to learn more about their respective crafts.

Edwin Landseer Lutyens was born in 1869. The son of a painter, he grew up in the village of Thursley in Surrey. Although less than thirty miles from central London, the Surrey Hills had remained a remote and rural area until the coming of the railway in the middle of the century. Blessed with a rich palette of building materials – clay brick and tile, oak, and Bargate stone – Surrey's beautiful and distinctive vernacular architecture captured the imagination of artists such as Helen Allingham (1848-1926) and Joshia Wood Whymper (1813-1903), architects of the fledgling AWG, and a new generation of wealthy young commuters who wanted to fuse the wealth derived from working in the City of London with living the rural idyll. As a consequence, at the time of Lutyens's youth, a prolific wave of new country houses, inspired by the local vernacular and designed by the first generation of Arts and Crafts architects, began to appear across this dramatic landscape. Lutyens was a sickly child which resulted in relatively little formal education. Instead he spent his time in the Surrey Hills with a sketchbook and, on occasion, a piece of glass onto which he would draw with a piece of soap, watching the craftsmen at work on these new country houses and learning at first-hand about materials, construction, and how geometry could be applied practically to design beautiful and efficient buildings. His education was therefore a practical one, learning though observation and dialogue with craftsmen. Indeed he read relatively little throughout his life, relying instead upon his acute observation to hone his professional skills.

An example of the practical geometry, acquired during these early years, and seen regularly in Lutyens's own work is the relatively steep pitch he used for roofs clad in clay tiles. He observed that vernacular buildings in Surrey had steep roofs to shed rainwater and snow. Furthermore, an angle of fifty-four degrees and forty-five minutes (sixty minutes equals one degree) results in a hip board of forty-five degrees, so making all the compound angles that the carpenter needs to cut when forming the roof structure, so much easier to achieve. We

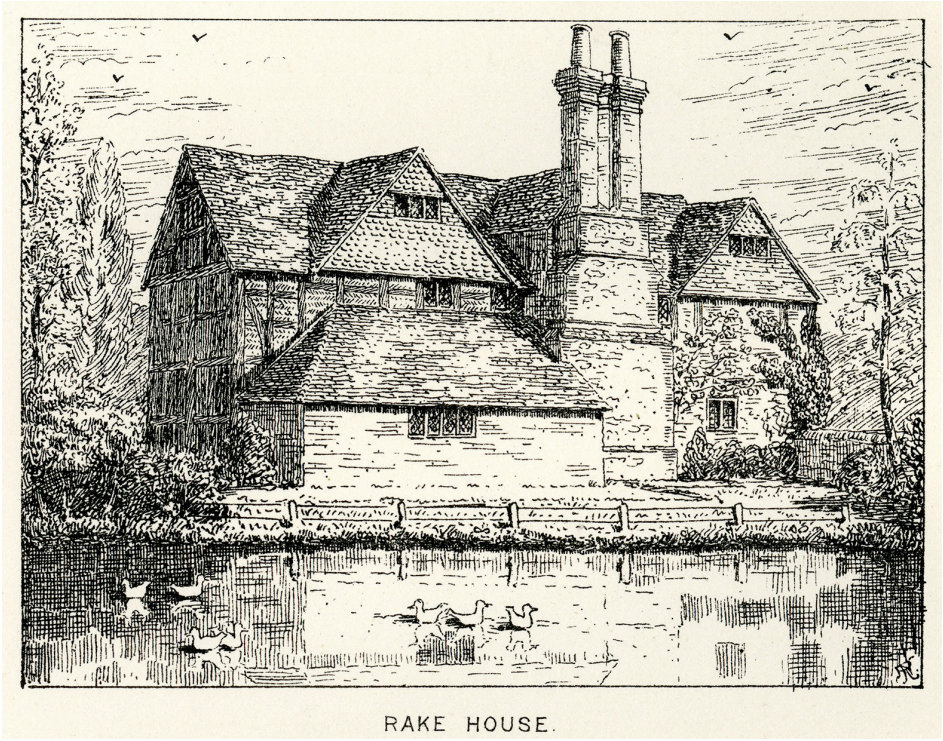


*Fig.2. Traditional* ***West Surrey house (c.1602) with steep roof line. Illustration in "Old Cottage and Domestic Architecture" by Ralph Nevill (1889). Author's copy.***

*Fig.3. Homewood, Park Lane, Knebworth, Hertfordshire (1901) by Sir Edwin Lutyens for the Dowager Lady Lytton. © Country Life.*

know that new recruits into Lutyens's office were given a set square with this angle to facilitate the replication of this detail. The residual angle was also perfect for the shallower sprockets at the eaves of a clay-tiled roof (Fig. 2). Lutyens retained affection for this angle drawn from the Surrey vernacular as his interest in Classical design increased. As a consequence, Lutyens's mouldings remained set at the steeper pitch of fifty-four degrees and forty-five minutes, whereas many projecting mouldings in Classical architecture conventionally have an angle of forty-five degrees. This gave all Lutyens's Classically inspired buildings, both canonical and abstract, a distinctive tight vertical aesthetic.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the majority of the first generation of Arts and Crafts architects began to incorporate Classical elements into their vernacular designs and the majority moved toward producing fully-fledged Classical designs. On the face of it this may appear to be a contradiction – how could architects whose ideology was rooted in the principals of the Gothic Revival convert to Classical design? Had they rejected the ideals upon which the Arts and Crafts Movement had been founded, or were their reasons for this shift more complicated? The answer is the latter. Whilst Ruskin and Pugin preached the Gothic as the only national style in Britain, Arts and Crafts architects recognised that Classical design was as much an integral part of the British vernacular. From the moment Classicism first appeared in Britain during the seventeenth century, in designs for grand new buildings across the country, provincial copies began to appear.

As great Classical treatises from the Renaissance became more widely available, and a new generation of British pattern-books emerged, full-scale original Classical designs flourished. By virtue of materials, climate, and established architectural traditions in Britain, these new Classical buildings were distinct in their character from their European cousins. The architects of the Arts and Crafts Movement came to recognise, therefore, that Classical architecture was every bit as British as the Gothic, whilst affording the same opportunities to incorporate the work of artists and craftsmen and other aspirations of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Classical design was more rational and repetitious in form, facilitating construction which at a time of economic prosperity was an important consideration – new buildings were required to be built

quickly. At a time of global competition, to establish empires across the world, there was also more than a whiff of imperialism, and a desire to create an heroic monumental architecture that would symbolise British supremacy across the world: for this purpose, Classicism was found to be more flexible and adaptable than the Gothic.[2]

In tune with this phenomenon, Lutyens's early Arts and Crafts buildings incorporated Classical elements reflecting the view that Classicism was an intrinsic part of British vernacular design. Homewood, the dower house he designed for his parents-in-law at Knebworth, Hertfordshire (1899), demonstrates this. It includes a steep clay-tiled roof and weather-boarded walls, an innovative (white painted) Mannerist central Classical doorcase and, on the rear elevation, central bays defined by Ionic pilasters. The plan and elevations of this house show the first flickering of interest in Lutyens's mind of a symmetrical Classical building (Fig. 3). In a letter (1903) to his friend Sir Herbert Baker (1862-1946), Lutyens outlined his growing fascination with Classicism:

> «In architecture, Palladio[3] is the game!! It is so big – few appreciate it now, and it requires training to value and realise it. The way Wren handled it is marvellous. Shaw has the gift. To the average man it is dry bones, but in the mind of a Wren it glows and the stiff material becomes as plastic as clay. I feel sure that if Ruskin had seen that point of view he would have raved as beautifully as he raved for the Gothic, and I think he did have some insight before he died: his later writings were much more gentle towards the Italian Renaissance.
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> It is a game that never deceives, dodges never disguise. It means hard thought all through – if it is laboured it fails. There is no fluke that helps it – the very what one might call machinery of it makes it impossible except in the hands of a [Inigo] Jones or a Wren. So it is a big game, a high game...».[4]

2. Looking back on the period, the Arts and Crafts architect Voysey reflected: "then...came the Art Workers' Guild, the aim of which was to bring craftsmen and architects of every description together, to compare their difficulties and explain their various crafts and peculiarities. All of which leads to a more and more practical attitude of mind than a theoretical one. Styles and conventions were slighted. All this time it will be remembered, the world was growing more and more materialistic, less religious and spiritually emotional. Prosperity was in the air. And the classic frame of mind was beginning to form. A severe climate favoured the Gothic, while a mild and sunny one induced the Classic. It is very easy then to see how the commercial prosperity and peace pervading the period...down to the commencement of the Great War, led the public to express itself in a Classical rather than a Gothic manner." Voysey 1931.

3. Andrea Palladio (1508-80).

4. Letter to Herbert Baker, 15th February 1903. Hussey 1953, pp. 121-2.

This exemplifies Lutyens 'Wrenaissance', his evolution into more full-blooded canonical Classical design, how he saw it as a logical extension of his Arts and Crafts roots, and the mental stimulation it afforded when designing in a Classical style.

In 1906 Lutyens produced his first fully Classical design, a new house called Heathcote at Ilkley in Yorkshire. The following passage (in a later letter to Baker) demonstrates Lutyens's belief that Classicism is a living architectural language, a way of designing that is capable of infinite sophistication and originality and that his approach to Classical design was essentially pragmatic and highly original, rather than historicist:

> «That timeworn Doric order – a lovely thing – I have the cheek to adopt it. You can't copy it. To be right you have to take it and design it.
> You, as an exercise take, take the order out of a book, as it stands and couple the columns... See what happens? Your bases interlock! Inigo jones solved the difficulty in one way and very good. Vanbrugh failed lamentably and clumsily. Wren avoided the problem. The problem is to get the two posts, with their triglyphs and metopes complete, proper in all parts, and not let the bases interlock, and without distortion of their bases, and then the soffits of the stones in their digested completeness. You cannot copy: you find if you do you are caught, a mess remains.
>
> It means hard labour, hard thinking, over every line in all three dimensions and in every joint; and no stone can be allowed to slide. If you tackle it in this way, the Order belongs to you, and every stroke, being mentally handed, must become endowed with such poetry and artistry as God has given you. You alter one feature (which you have to, always), then every other feature has to sympathise and undergo some care and invention. Therefore it is no mean (game), nor is it a game you can play light-heartedly».[5]

Shortly after this, Lutyens started work on the British pavilion for the International Exhibition of Art (*Esposizione internazionale d'arte*) (1911) held in Rome to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the declaration of the State of Italy.[6]

5. Letter to Herbert Baker, 29th January 1911. Hussey 1953, p. 133.

6. The British School at Rome project afforded Lutyens his first opportunity to visit the Eternal City and, in a letter back to his wife, Lady Emily in 1909, he expressed his delight with what he saw in this cradle of Classical architecture, and his surprise at the location of familiar Classical buildings on a complex and irregular medieval street plan; he had clearly anticipated that the urban form would be more rational and formal as he was to go on to create in his masterplan for the imperial capital New Delhi: "I don't know where to begin or how to describe what I have seen. St Peter's, various churches, the Capitol, Medici, other palaces, the forum...There is so much here in little ways of things I thought I had invented! No wonder peo-

*Fig.5. The British School at Rome, façade (1912-16).*
*© BSR Photographic Archive, British School at Rome Collection, bs-0018.*

*Fig.6. Viceroy's House, New Delhi, India (1912-31) by Sir Edwin Lutyens for the Government of India. Photograph by Scott Dexter, Brooklyn, USA (2008).*

Once again writing to Baker, Lutyens outlined his brief for the pavilion from the British Government expressing his delight in redesigning one of his favourite buildings (Fig. 4) by Sir Christopher Wren:

> «The condition to copy, i.e. adapt, the upper order of the west front of St. Paul's[7] was given to me by the Board of Trade. They all thought it very like, but it wasn't a bit, which is where the fun came in for me. The whole order had to be altered, and I think it takes more architectural technique to do this, and make every other part fit in, with the design of an undoubted master like Wren. The cornice, columns, etc. were altered, the portico, and pediment etc; a great labour but it was very interesting. To the lay mind a copy is good enough but to an architect, except some tradesman, it means a great deal of thought, insight, knowledge».[8]

The British School at Rome commission (1912-16) (Fig. 5) coincided with Lutyens's appointment as a member of the three man Delhi Planning Committee which, in time, led to his commission to design the Viceroy's House (1921), now called the Rashtrapati Bhavan, the centre-piece of his masterplan for the new imperial capital.

> «The style is to be one adaptable to all climates yet represent the ideal of British Empire. Of course Classic is the only architectural language that can achieve this and I am sure it is better, saner, wiser and more gentlemanlike than the most sentimental of an English Building bad Indian or bad anything else».[9]

In the event, the design of Viceroy's House (Fig. 6) became an idiosyncratic and highly original fusion of Classical and traditional Indian design. A Moghul *chujja* replaces a conventional Classical cornice around the building; *chattris*, or little pavilions, appear in clusters on the parapet similar to those found at Fatehpur Sikri, and the whole composition is dominated by the tall and imperious dome, the

ple think I must have been to Italy. Perhaps I have, but it was not Rome. I have no internal ronge (*a family word meaning memory*) and nothing comes in the least where I expect it. My old friends stand in the most unexpected places and in the oddest relation to each other." Quoted in Petter 1992 from RIBA Lutyens Letters, 21 October 1909 (LUV/11/2/9).

7. St Paul's Cathedral, London.

8. Cited in Hussey 1953, p. 199-200.

9. Letter to Lady Emily Lutyens, 27 September 1914. Percy & Ridley 1988, p. 305.


*Fig.7. The Cenotaph, Whitehall, London (1919-20) by Sir Edwin Lutyens. Photograph by Adrian Pingstone (2005).*

form of which is inspired, at least in part, by the Buddhist Great Stupa at Sanchi. In similar vein, the columns which articulate the cooling portico or verandah around the outside of the building, are Corinthian in proportion but the acanthus leaves one would expect to see on the capitals are replaced with a band of vertical ridges, and the volutes are replaced with four solid bells in each corner of the abacus. The myth persists that there is a legend in Indian folklore that dynasties fall to the sound of ringing bells and that these solid, 'unringable' bells were a symbol to ensure that the dynasty in question – the British Raj – would never end. However, Robert Lutyens (1901-71), in his biography of his father, is sceptical as to whether this was the true inspiration. Either way, the 'Delhi Order' is a highly original and distinctive design and sits well alongside Benjamin Latrobe's (1764-1820) nationalistic 'corn on the cob' and 'tobacco leaf' Orders in the Capitol in Washington D.C. The fusion of elements from other architectural traditions with Classical architecture that is so evident in New Delhi is of course a logical extension of Lutyens's Arts and Crafts origins, but now retuned with the balance in favour of full-blooded Classicism. In his own jocular way, Lutyens referred to his work in New Delhi as just a 'concrete flag', in other words a powerful symbol of British Imperialism. A message of a very different kind was required however for his memorials for those who had given their lives for their country in The Great War (Fig. 7). They were not to be 'concrete flags' but, as Tony Fretton[10] has commented «places finely attuned to the discipline and dignity of military life, the feelings of surviving relatives, and the consoling qualities of natural growth and renewal in the surrounding countryside where war and death had had their fling». Lutyens's response was to evolve a style that was at once both Classical and Modern, relying for effect upon powerful simple geometric form, the monumentality of which is accentuated through subtle setbacks and tapering on the corners, and embellished with restrained Classical details. Thereafter Lutyens large urban commissions built upon these principals. The buildings became increasingly planar and abstract, often with progressive setbacks on the corners to give an accentuated sense of perspective and monumentality. At the Midland

10 Geurst 2010. Forward.


*Fig.8. Midland Bank, Poultry, City of London. Headquarters Building (1924-39) by Sir Edwin Lutyens. Author's photograph.*

Bank Headquarters, Poultry (1924-39) in the City of London (Fig. 8), the rusticated ground floor incorporates another Lutyens innovation: 'disappearing' Doric pilasters, the bases and capitals of which pop out of the otherwise flat rusticated wall. The corners of that building step back progressively accentuating the monumentality of the building even though it sits between other buildings in the street. Later on, his design for the Midland Bank in Manchester (1935), designed on a prominent corner site, this concept is even more developed.

In summary, Lutyens's approach to Classical architecture was essentially a pragmatic one, informed by his understanding of craft and geometry acquired at the outset of his career in the hills of Surrey, and developed through his acute powers of visual observation and analysis as to how masters such as Palladio and Wren had made the language their own, all seasoned with the political and ideological pressures of the age in which he lived. This story is not only interesting in its own right, but it lays out a roadmap for young architects working today who aspire to work in a Classical manner, showing them how they too can evolve a rich and personal style appropriate to their era within the spirit or this extraordinary versatile and enduring architectural tradition.

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