# An artist's dream

## Copse Hill, Surrey
## The Home of Alexander and Mary Creswell

The Surrey Hills possesses the most important collection of Arts-and-Crafts houses in England. MARY MIERS visits one example where the artistic tradition that fostered these buildings is still flourishing. KATHRYN BRADLEY-HOLE is enthralled by its gardens

THE extraordinary flowering of Arts-and-Crafts houses in the Surrey Hills is linked to a group of artistic and bohemian patrons whose discovery of the area's rustic charms was made possible by the coming of the railway. Until the 1880s, the range of greensand hills that runs parallel to the North Downs was mostly piney heath grazed by hefted flocks; remote and little visited—it was reputedly the haunt of smugglers, who would hole up for days in the lower wooded hollows. The railways brought the area to the notice of painters, writers and musicians, who were among the earliest commuters to Surrey. Artists such as Arthur Rackham, Edmund Dulac, Helen Allingham and Benjamin Williams Leader came to paint the picturesque cottages and farmhouses, and to record the rural way of life whose very survival, ironically, was threatened by the new railway age. Rural Surrey offered a comfortable alternative to painting trips abroad—artists could sit up on the heath painting all day under wide open skies, and by the evening be back in their Chelsea studios. Today, the pattern of ownership in the area has reverted to something of its former character, and leading figures in the arts, as well as London businessmen, again own many of the properties.

Copse Hill, which stands on the south-facing escarpment of Pitch Hill only 26 miles from Hyde Park Corner, is unusual in having belonged to the same family for a century. Theirs is a strong artistic and creative tradition that is still very much alive in the present generation. Alexander Creswell, who lives here with his wife, Mary, and their three children, is a well-known artist, whose powerful watercolours are widely sought after in Britain and abroad. Since taking over Copse Hill in 1994, the Creswells have made a number of gentle alterations to modernise the house without destroying its atmosphere of faded elegance. Mr Creswell's brilliant eye for the effects of colour in different conditions of light is apparent in the way he has subtly repainted the principal rooms, being careful to preserve their original spirit and the eclectic arrangement of furnishings and contents introduced by his French grandmother.

The house is situated at Ewhurst on land that once belonged to the Bray family, owners of the manors of Shere for more than 500 years. It stands on what was still open hillside skirted by young oakwoods when, in 1905, the site was bought by a Miss Head, who commissioned the amateur architect Christopher Hatton Turnor to build a house for herself and her female companion.

In contrast to the 'Surrey style' pioneered by so many of its neighbours, Copse Hill resembles nothing so much as a Mediterranean villa, with its lime-washed brick ranges enclosing a courtyard **(Fig 4)** and Italianate roofs with handmade terracotta tiles and Venetian-style chimneys. All the views are on the garden side, so that the house turns its back on London and the steep hill that shades its entrance front, and soaks in the sun through its principal rooms, which face south-west over the Weald. Their view, sweeping out far below to the blueish haze of the South Downs, is magnificent. Seen beyond the steeply dropping garden, with its Mediterranean cypresses, pots of geraniums, vine and olive and lemon trees, it might be mistaken for the Italian *campagna*, and the house, with its unusual garden front **(Fig 1)** contained within the all-embracing span of a 76ft-wide gable, is pierced by balconied windows with pretty louvred shutters that add greatly to this distinctly un-English impression. 'On a sunny day, when the shutters work beautifully to cool the rooms, it's quite extraordinary how Continental it feels,' remarks Mr Creswell.

Copse Hill is so very unlike Turnor's other domestic works (which include half-timbered Hurtwood just over the hill), that it is possible that a Mr Kent, whose name also appears on the plans, was partly responsible for its design. However, it has many details characteristic of Turnor's Arts-and-Crafts style, the best-known example of which is the Watts Gallery at nearby Compton of 1903–04. There are the distinctive multi-paned lunettes with balconies and the tile-topped buttresses on the garden front, and the generous use of arches reminiscent of Voysey. Inside, everything is deliberately unadorned—few mouldings; no capitals to mark the low springing points of the arches, and windows with solid, unmoulded glazing bars. Notable among the fine joinery and ironmongery are simple ledge-and-brace doors with self-closing, rolling latches and tiled fireplaces with beautifully profiled mantels on glazed terracotta brackets—a typical Turnor feature.

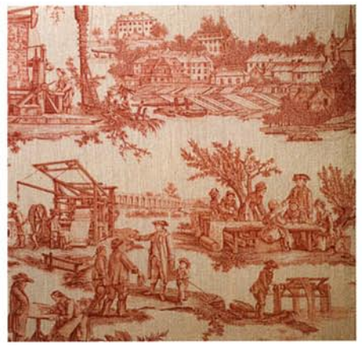
Turnor's spell as an architect was brief, and he is best known as an agricultural and social reformer, who pioneered his ideas on the extensive Lincolnshire estates he inherited from his uncle. Lutyens, with whom he worked at Roseneath in Dunbartonshire in 1897, described him in a letter of 1904 as 'so odd and mad, so full of original ideas, principally agricultural, quite clever, at least receptive, architecturally'.

**1—The garden front, with its shutters and multi-paned lunettes, was originally limewashed a light ochre colour, which the owners intend to redo**

## Isabel Vulliamy 1869–1956

Isabel Vulliamy was living in Cobham with her father, who had fled France in the 1880s, when she met and married Col Edmund Creswell, a widower with eight children. Of Huguenot origin, the Vulliamys spawned the famous clockmakers to George III and IV and the architect Benjamin Lewis Vulliamy. Isabel's mother was descended from the Oberkampfs, whose textile mills on their Versailles estates produced toile de Jouy. Copse Hill still resonates with memories of Isabel, a powerful intellectual who toyed with Theosophy and rattled the quiet Surrey community with her maverick ideals. Passionate and tricky, she filled the house with waifs and strays, orphans from the Blitz and Basque refugees, yet she would not allow them to venture down the main stairs and her staff found her intimidating

2—Portrait in the drawing room of Baron Christophe-Philippe Oberkampf, inventor of toile de Jouy, with his mother. On the chest of drawers below is an engraving by Boilly of the Baron as an old man



(*Left and below*) 3—Details from the dining-room curtains, made of original fabric printed with the *Travaux de la Manufacture* design, showing the Oberkampf's Jouy-en-Jonas textile mills and Château de Jouy, reflecting Isabel Creswell's ancestry

4—A Mediterranean flavour: Venetian-style chimneys and Italianate roofs with handmade terracotta tiles overlook the sheltered courtyard



5—The drawing-room walls have been repainted by Alexander Creswell, in a carefully chosen blue-grey colour, christened 'dead butler'

The spinsters for whom Copse Hill was built never actually moved in. One of them died before it was complete, and the house was bought by Col Edmund Creswell and his young wife, Isabel, who came across it by chance after taking a wrong turn when motoring to Peaslake to visit cousins. Although the house was unfinished, Isabel knew immediately that this was where she wanted to live and create a garden, and they became the owners in 1908.

Before moving in a year later, the Creswells made certain alterations to the plan. The original drawings, dated 1905/06, show a covered passage leading down the steep slope from the road to one side of the courtyard, but this was not built. Instead, a flight of stone steps, narrower at the bottom to give a false perspective, descends on the central axis to the entrance, which leads directly into a lateral corridor on the north front. The Creswells added the porch, which disguises the awkward drop in level to the front door, and turned the stairs round so that they open off the corridor (the original plan had proposed that the dining room would double as a stairhall, in typical Edwardian fashion). ➢

6—The guest bedroom has recently been redecorated with the original toile de Jouy design *L'Offrande à l'Amour*, reblocked by Mr Creswell's cousin Jean-Matthieu Prévot

In the 1920s, they introduced electricity and raised the kitchen wing to two storeys, adding on a gardener's cottage with a garage above approached from the steep bank behind.

For a time, the artist Leonard Campbell Taylor RA lived in the cottage, and he executed several views of the house. His painting *The Letter* of 1942 (now in the Ferens Art Gallery in Hull) captures the fine view of the enfilade along the garden front, looking from the dining room through the central garden lobby to the drawing room beyond. Little has changed: the oval mirror, table and rug are still in the drawing room, together with other pieces of Empire and Restauration furniture that, like most of the contents of the house, came from Château de Jouy, home of Isabel's maternal forbears the Oberkampfs **(Fig 2)**. Several are companion pieces to furniture at Le Bois des Moutiers near Dieppe, the house Lutyens designed for Isabel's cousins the Mallets, adding an extra dimension to the interiors at Copse Hill.

The drawing room **(Fig 5)** is beautifully light and airy, but the walls had become smoke-stained and the decoration needed refreshing. 'I had such fun finding the right

**'The Creswells' artistic and creative tradition is very much alive in the present generation'**

faded blue-grey—the same colour as a beautiful Imari plate in the room,' says Mr Creswell. 'Once I'd got it right—I call it 'dead butler'—I overlaid it with limewash and then painted the timber struts [applied to the plaster walls to suggest panelling] with a matching solid colour in eggshell.'

Behind the drawing room is the study **(Fig 8)**, which the plans show as a boudoir with a loggia beyond. The loggia proved dank and impractical, and early on was bricked up and incorporated into the study. Above the fireplace is a painting by Pierre Antoine Labouchère, who married Baron Oberkampf's granddaughter. It depicts the artist in his Paris study in the 1820s, with many objects that can be seen today at Copse Hill.

In the dining room **(Fig 7)**, the curtains are made of some of the original toile de Jouy produced in the Oberkampfs' textile mills **(Fig 3)**. They replaced the dark red curtains that now hang in the hall, which were made of another cloth woven at Jouy—the serge for Napoleon's soldiers' trousers. Upstairs, the guest bedroom **(Fig 6)** has recently been redecorated with curtains and wallpaper reblocked by Mr Creswell's cousin Jean-Matthieu Prévot to the original toile de Jouy design *L'Offrande à l'Amour.*

After Isabel's death in 1956, Copse Hill became rather neglected and rundown. Her son, Michael, and his glamorous wife, Mea

**7—The dining room on the garden front with recent paintings by Mr Creswell of classic yachts**

Schwartzenberg (Mr Creswell's parents), usually lived abroad, and only returned home after Michael retired from the diplomatic service. He died in 1986, and Mea lived on here as a widow until her death in 2002.

Her son and daughter-in-law's input since they took over reflects the Arts-and-Crafts consciousness of their forebears. Mrs Creswell is the great-granddaughter of the architect William Curtis Green—author of *Old Cottages and Farmhouses in Surrey,* brother of the furniture maker Romney Curtis Green and father of the architect Christopher Green (her grandfather)—and so was brought up very much in this tradition. After moving to Copse Hill, she helped set up the charity The Arts-and-Crafts Movement in Surrey.

The Creswells' approach is perfectly exemplified by the garden shed/workshop that the Creswells commissioned a decade ago from students of The Prince of Wales' Institute. Built to Mark Hoare's design entirely of materials from within a three-mile radius, this delightful building is very much in tune with the creative spirit that continues to enrich this most unusual house and garden.

**8—The study, with hunting trophies shot by Michael Creswell in southern Germany in 1939 when he was covertly gathering intelligence from, among others, Herman Göring, also a keen sportsman. In 1940, Creswell set up M19 with Airey Neave, organising the escape routes from occupied Europe. After the war, he was the British Ambassador in Finland, Yugoslavia and Argentina**



**Suggesting lazy Riviera days: the south-west-facing top terrace basks in sunshine**

# A magical glimpse into the past

## Recent restorations at Copse Hill garden reveal the Arts-and-Crafts ideals prescribed by Gertrude Jekyll

COPSE HILL garden is a remarkable, atmospheric time capsule, enclosed and protected by the big forest trees for which west Surrey is famous; yet, owing to the steep gradient, the house enjoys misty views over the treetops to the South Downs some 30 miles away. (On a clear day, from the upper storey, you can see outlined the ancient hill fort of Cissbury Ring near Worthing and, here and there, shimmering hints of the sea.)

Such a location is a gift to a gardener, for winter frosts roll away down the hill, and the garden's south-west-facing aspect ensures it basks in sunshine, wherever the trees allow.

**'The thrilling discovery of Isabel Creswell's notebooks stimulated the present owners to peel back the layers of time'**

In fact, trees were the defining vegetation when Alexander and Mary Creswell took over the property in 1994, for the garden that had been contemporary with the house had long been lost, largely taken over by dense vegetation, brambles and sapling trees, and its terraces and central stairway had disappeared under banked earth and turf. It was the thrilling discovery of Isabel Creswell's copious garden notebooks, jottings on backs of envelopes and coloured-up garden plans that stimulated the present owners to embark on a gentle restoration, peeling back the layers of time to reveal an Edwardian garden very much in the mode prescribed by Gertrude Jekyll, with colour-themed borders, a pergola for climbing roses, and paths of local stone beside the garden steps, crazy-paved in the informal vernacular manner favoured by Jekyll.

What we see today is a synthesis of Isabel Creswell's designs for terraces and herbaceous borders in the upper garden, joined by the present generation's reasonably low-maintenance plants that enhance the sun-filled top terrace. A pergola propped on brick piers adjoins the south elevation of the house, garlanded by a bronze-leaved grape vine *Vitis vinifera* Purpurea and a climbing hydrangea. At the western end, a fine wisteria clambers

**(*Above*) Mark Hoare designed the garden workshop. (*Right*) A Mediterranean flavour on the upper terraces**

up the wall. Around the fine arched doorway into the house, arrangements of potted plants and garden chairs give a relaxed air, conjuring up images of a *fin de siècle* villa on the Riviera. This is reinforced when sunshine beats down on the gravelled terrace and bees hum in the lavenders and sisyrinchiums. Terracotta pots erupt at intervals along the top of the retaining wall, each one containing a young olive tree, underplanted with a foam of cheery Mexican daisy *Erigeron mucronatus*.

Isabel Creswell planted thuja and cypress trees for their vertical form and, as the moribund ones are removed, new cypresses (*Cupressus sempervirens* Stricta) are being added, for continuity from generation to generation.


**Colour in the garden**

It was interesting to find among Isabel Creswell's papers her numerous plant lists and a couple of coloured-up plans (*above*) for her main flower borders, extending in long, parallel beds from the base of the steps to the start of the wilder garden. They show careful attention to Gertrude Jekyll's method for 'a distinct scheme of colour arrangement' as described in detail in *Colour Schemes for the Flower Garden*—first published in 1908, the very year that Isabel settled at Copse Hill. The pattern of irregular, lozenge shapes recalls Miss Jekyll's method for indicating drifts of one type of herbaceous plant (perhaps five or seven plants for each 'lozenge') merging casually into neighbouring 'lozenges'. Taller varieties would necessarily occupy the back of the border, but the stodgy formality of Victorian ribbon borders and geometric bedding schemes was entirely rejected.



**White waterlilies embellish the smaller of two ponds in the lower garden, which has a romantically wild feel**

A generous stone-paved stairway leads down the garden's central axis from the house, taking you to lower terraces and a pair of herbaceous borders flanking a broad, lawned path. Beyond them lie the wilder gardens, with orchard trees erupting from a wildflower meadow; a small pond and circuitous paths lead past ornamental trees into natural woodland. Near the bottom boundary, Alexander Creswell delighted in excavating a large pond with the help of a mechanised digger.

East of the terraced, upper gardens, slender paths take you under trees or via another pergola walk, past abundant cottage-garden plantings of campanulas, hollyhocks, roses and echiums, to attractive feather-boarded garden buildings and a broad upper lawn. The lawn's levelled-out surface suggests it was made for croquet or tennis in an earlier era, and its sunniest side nurtures a bed of sun-loving herbs, salvias, and odd herbaceous things awaiting a more permanent home.

H. J. Massingham, a pastoral writer of the mid 20th century, was bewitched by a visit to Copse Hill, writing (in *Through the Wilderness*, 1935): 'The garden descended in a series of terraces down to its wilder floor, rich in marsh for *Iris kaempferi*, recessed corners for *Lilium Brownii* and the wood-lily, little jungles of bamboo, exquisite maples, glades of the columnar gentian, banks and scoops of primulas. Between wild and terraced garden was a seat facing the house with herbaceous borders on each side of the broad tiers, backed by maple and other carefully chosen shrubs.'

He noted the free-standing wisterias trained as standards 'with the twisted branches fanned out on all sides and the lilac blooms hanging from overhead'. This technique was popularised by Mrs C. W. Earle in the best-selling *Pot-pourri from A Surrey Garden* (1897 and subsequent editions). 'It interested me, therefore,' says Massingham, 'to learn that she [Isabel Creswell] had personally known Mrs Earle, one of the pioneers in the revolt against the carpet-bedder and in the movement towards naturalisation.'

Massingham admired the sensitivity with which the garden blended into its natural environment and 'a certain disarray was evident which never lapsed into an ungardenly anarchy'. Much the same could be said today, and it is to the Creswells' credit that Copse Hill is both a charming family garden and a living testament to its maker a century ago.

*Photographs: Will Pryce.*