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978-0-521-13682-2 - Modern Country Homes in England: The Arts and Crafts Architecture of Barry Parker

Edited by Dean Hawkes

Excerpt

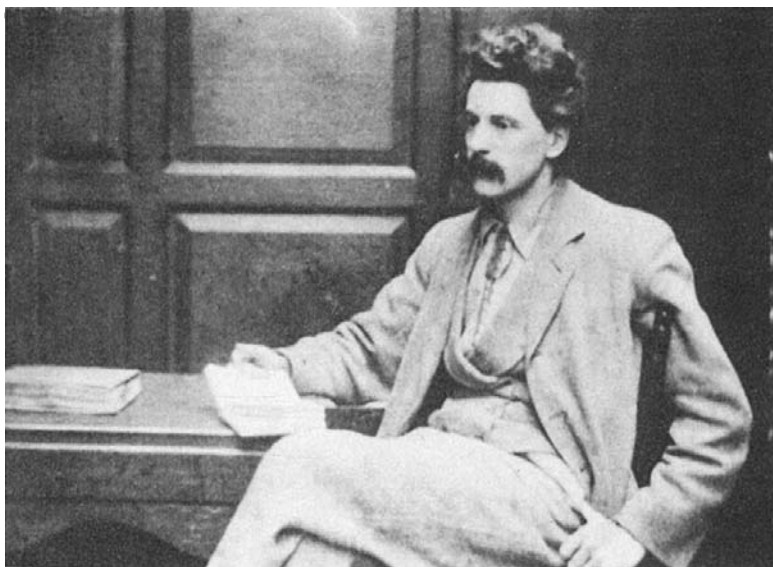
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## Introduction

The indulgent reader is asked to bear in mind that the following chapters appeared in substance first, under the title of 'Modern Country Homes in England', as a series of papers in the New York monthly, 'The Craftsman', with the willing concurrence of the Editor of which magazine this collected English edition has been prepared.

Of many shortcomings no one can be more conscious than the Author. Written in the scanty leisure of a busy man, often hastily, and at intervals spread over some two years, the papers were free from neither repetition nor discursiveness, nor was any strictly logical development of idea pursued; with some revision and compression they are now offered, modestly, for what they may be worth; not by any means as a literary exercise, but as the mature expression of the faith that guides in his work a sincere and experienced artist.

These words were written by Barry Parker in 1912. Unfortunately the book to which they were to be the Preface was not published. His English contemporaries were thus deprived of the opportunity of reading the ideas which he had set down for the American readers of *The Craftsman*.<sup>1</sup> The present book is a revival of Parker's project. The



1 Barry Parker, c.1900

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aim is to make an important document of the Arts and Crafts movement available to a wide readership. Because Parker chose to illustrate his essays entirely with buildings designed by himself and his partner Raymond Unwin, this is also an opportunity to assess their achievement as architects. This aspect of their work has, surprisingly, been largely neglected by historians of the period, perhaps because it was overshadowed by their work as the planners of the Garden City, or maybe because, for some, the Garden City connection automatically disqualified them from consideration as 'pioneers' of the modern movement.<sup>2</sup>

The body of Part Two is based upon Barry Parker's original text. This has been edited further to eliminate the repetition and discursiveness for which he apologised in his Preface, and the opportunity has been taken to place both the text and the buildings which it describes in their contemporary context and to discuss their qualities and value from a late twentieth-century viewpoint. Many of the illustrations are taken from the archive of original drawings and photographs held at the First Garden City Museum at Letchworth.

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*Part One*



**The Arts and Crafts Architecture  
of Barry Parker**




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## A Biographical Sketch

The decade which began in 1860 saw the births of numerous men who were to have a profound influence upon the future direction of the art of architecture. On the continent the list includes Victor Horta (1861–1947), Theodor Fischer (1862–1938), Henri Van de Velde (1863–1957), Hector Guimard (1867–1947), J. M. Olbrich (1867–1908) and Peter Behrens (1868–1940). In America the major figure is without doubt Frank Lloyd Wright – whichever of the suggested birthdates is accepted – (1867(9)–1959),<sup>1</sup> and amongst others are Bernard Maybeck (1862–1957) and the Greene brothers, Henry M. (1867–1954) and Charles S. (1868–1957). At the turn of the century British domestic architecture received worldwide admiration and most of these buildings were the work of men of this generation. Amongst these Edgar Wood (1860–1935) practised mainly in the north of England, in and around Manchester, and C. R. Ashbee (1863–1942) was the man who perhaps gave Arts and Crafts ideals their most overt social expression when in 1902 he led the Guild of Handicraft away from London to establish a community at Chipping Camden in the Cotswolds.<sup>2</sup> M. H. Baillie Scott (1865–1945) is one of the most widely acknowledged of English architects of this period, his work receiving wide publicity both at home in Britain and on the continent.<sup>3</sup> Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868–1928) and Edwin Lutyens (1869–1944),<sup>4</sup> although quite different in most respects, were in most assessments, the giants of the period.

Richard Barry Parker qualifies for membership of this impressive gathering, by having been born in 1867 at Chesterfield, an industrial town on the edge of the beautiful Derbyshire Peak District and, a more important measure, by the quality of his work. He attended the South Kensington Art School in London in 1886 and studied interior design with T. C. Simmonds at Derby in 1887–9. He then moved to Manchester where he served articles with G. Faulkner Armitage until 1893. He then went to live near Chesterfield with his elder sister, Ethel, and her husband – and half cousin – Raymond Unwin. Here he began his independent architectural career. In 1895 he moved across Derbyshire to Buxton in order to be near his ageing parents. The following year the Unwins came to join him and thus began an architectural partnership which was to last for eighteen years until

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2 Family group at Buxton, c. 1898. Barry Parker is standing at the right, Raymond Unwin is at the left and Ethel Unwin (née Parker) is seated front right.



Unwin moved, in 1914, into public service in the post of Chief Inspector of Town Planning at the Local Government Board.

Unwin was four years older than Parker and although he was also born in the industrial north at Rotherham in South Yorkshire he had grown up in Oxford where his father taught at Balliol College School. He returned to the north, however, in 1882 when he became an apprentice engineer at the Staveley Coal and Iron Company near Chesterfield. Here he eventually became responsible for the design of cottages for the miners and in 1893 his architectural experience was extended when he was asked to design the church in the village of Barrow Hill outside Chesterfield. This coincided with Parker's arrival and many years later Parker recalled this episode in their lives, sketching an impression of youthful Arts and Crafts idealism, when he wrote, 'Evening after evening, Unwin sat placing the little glass cubes [for the mosaic reredos] in position on the cartoon which I had made, in readiness for their transfer to the cement-rendered east wall of the church, while I drew and his wife, my sister, read to us.'<sup>5</sup> It is clear that there was a very close bond between the two men even though the partnership between them was never formally sealed. Many years later, looking back, Parker described it in romantic terms: 'When the partnership between him and me began no one can say. We acted on the assumption that it would come into being before it did. No partnership deed was ever drawn up. None was needed. Mutual understanding was complete.'<sup>6</sup>

The practice began, as so many do, with commissions from family and friends, and quickly flourished. Both men were committed to improving the quality of working-class housing, and their first-hand

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experience of conditions in the industrial towns would have had a persuasive influence upon them. They were actively involved in the socialist cause and were early members of the Fabian Society. It was almost inevitable that they would become steeped in the ideas of William Morris, and Unwin, who seemed to be the more overtly political of the two, travelled around the industrial towns addressing branches of 'The Labour Church', on such subjects as 'The Life and Work of William Morris'.

All of this predisposed them towards giving expression to Morris's visions through their work and in 1901 they collected together a series of lectures and essays under the title of *The Art of Building a Home*.<sup>7</sup> The titles of some of these pieces indicate the Arts and Crafts roots of their thinking. Parker wrote 'Of the Dignity of All True Art' and Unwin 'Of Art and Simplicity'. The social dimension of their interests is reflected in other titles, 'Of the Smaller Middle Class House', 'Of the Art of Designing Smaller Houses and Cottages' and 'Of Co-Operation in Building'.

These themes were illustrated by their own designs, and the book, which ran to a second edition in the year of its publication, must have brought them to the attention of new clients. In 1902 Joseph and Seeborn Rowntree, of the Quaker chocolate-making family, appointed Parker and Unwin as architects for the model village of New Earswick near York. Here they were able to give large-scale expression to their ideas and to gain the experience which equipped them to succeed in the limited competition, held in the following year, for the design of the First Garden City at Letchworth in Hertfordshire under the direct inspiration of Ebenezer Howard. The other competitors were W. R. Lethaby and Halsey Ricardo, who decided to submit a joint proposal, and Geoffrey Lucas and Sidney Cranfield.

By winning this competition Parker and Unwin were thrust more prominently into the public eye and their practice grew rapidly. Of perhaps equal importance for the development of their careers was the fact that they were compelled by the size of the task to open an office in the southern counties. The design for the Garden City was prepared, in a cottage on the site, by Unwin assisted by Robert Bennett who was an articled pupil in the office. These two were visited by Parker as often as the demands of the Buxton office would allow. After their appointment as Consulting Architects to First Garden City Limited they rented offices at Baldock, the nearest town, and soon leased a site in Letchworth on which to build an office (see also plan, Ill. 92).<sup>8</sup>

Nearby, Unwin built a house for himself and his family (see Ills. 44 and 45), but very shortly, in 1906, he was invited, by Dame Henrietta Barnett, to make a plan for Hampstead Garden Suburb. He moved to live at Wylde, North End, Hampstead, a beautiful old house, intending to return to Letchworth after some two years. In the event

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3 Interior of the drawing office at Letchworth, c.1908



the attractions of both the house and life on the fringe of the capital proved too great and the practice was, for the remaining years to 1914, based upon the two offices: Letchworth, with Parker in charge, and Hampstead under Unwin.

All of the evidence suggests that this separation did not break the bond of spirit between the two men, even though their interests began to move in different directions. The Hampstead office concentrated on work in the Garden Suburb and attracted many men who were to make their mark elsewhere. In international terms the most notable of these was Ernst May who was to become 'Stadtbaurat' (City Architect) of Frankfurt in 1925. There he was responsible for numerous housing projects which, beneath their modern movement clothing, reveal many qualities which bear witness to the influence of his association with Parker and Unwin.<sup>9</sup> In Letchworth there was much to be done in the Garden City, both in designing new housing schemes for the various cottage societies, which were building low-cost dwellings, and in commissions for larger houses nearby and much further afield.

An additional responsibility which Parker and Unwin assumed was that of drafting and administering the Building Regulations for First Garden City Limited. These went beyond the provisions of conven-

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tional building bye-laws in force in England at the time in imposing restrictions on the density at which houses could be built. This ranged from a maximum of twelve to the acre for houses costing less than £200, to four to the acre for lavish designs costing £500 or upwards. Other concerns were with the quality of construction and design of the dwellings themselves.<sup>10</sup> The administration of these regulations must have itself been time-consuming. It is interesting to discover contemporaries as notable as Baillie Scott being subjected to the scrutiny of Parker and Unwin in gaining approval for their designs in Letchworth.<sup>11</sup> It was by these means that the essential qualities that distinguish the Garden City from most contemporary housing in England were achieved and maintained.

Against this background of intensive activity both partners continued to produce written statements about their ideals and commitments. In 1909 Unwin's increasing interest in the cause of town planning was given full expression with the publication of his book *Town Planning in Practice*.<sup>12</sup> This coincided with the passing of the Town Planning Act of 1909, and Unwin, who regularly revealed a shrewd sense of timing, wrote, surely with false modesty, in his Preface:

When a Bill conferring town planning powers on municipal bodies was promised by the Government, it occurred to me that it would probably be of use, if some of the maps, photographs and other material which I had collected during some years' study and practice of what I have ventured to call the art of town planning could be put together and published. Hence this book. The spare time at my disposal has only enabled me to deal in an introductory and imperfect manner with the different points raised. . . .

This 'modest' effort is a work of over 400 pages in length with over 300 illustrations! Its influence in shaping the development of towns and cities is evident throughout Britain, where, to this day, most housing development is conceived in terms of ideas which were first given expression in the Garden City – although, alas, seldom now with the sensitivity and flair which characterised the original models. The overseas influence of the book may be less explicit, but was nonetheless far-reaching, as much for the analysis which is recommended as for the forms and images which it contains.

Parker's essays in *The Craftsman* add up to a body of work almost as substantial as *Town Planning in Practice* and it is perhaps not too fanciful to suggest that he saw them as a complement to Unwin's book. In terms of scale they begin where Unwin stopped, taking us from consideration of site layout, down through garden design, to the smallest details of the individual house. Walter Creese has written with great insight that,

The particular message of Parker and Unwin's architecture seems to be that British [town] planning, as we know it, arose as much out of William Morris's



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Arts and Crafts as out of any independent thought about cities alone. The houses of Parker and Unwin are a visible link between the crafts of Parker and Unwin and the towns they created.<sup>13</sup>

The invitation from Gustav Stickley, the owner and editor of *The Craftsman*, to write at such length in his journal must have been seized by Parker as an ideal opportunity to re-affirm the scope of his and Unwin's architectural vision as it had been first presented in *The Art of Building a Home*, and had subsequently been applied and tested in their practice.



## Gustav Stickley, *The Craftsman* and England

Gustav Stickley (1857–1942) was born in Wisconsin, the son of a stonemason.<sup>1</sup> While he was still in his teens he discovered the writings of John Ruskin. These were to remain a lifelong influence and directed his attention towards events and personalities in England. In 1900 he opened a factory at Eastwood, New York, to manufacture Arts and Crafts style furniture. The following year he began publication of *The Craftsman*.<sup>2</sup> This quickly became an important influence on architectural ideas and public taste in America. In May 1903 Stickley published the first of many designs for *Craftsman Homes*, which was his own work, assisted by E. G. W. Dietrich. Kornwolf has pointed to the similarity between this house and aspects of Baillie Scott's work, but Stickley himself saw his ideal in the work of Parker and Unwin. In reviewing *The Art of Building a Home* he wrote:

. . . two well-known English architects, Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin, who in a series of lectures published under the title of 'The Art of Building a Home' have entered a plea for greater honesty in architecture and greater sincerity in decoration which ought to strike a responsive chord in the heart of every American who has contemplated the foolish, unthinking, artificial structures which we have vainly called homes.

In the introduction to this valuable little book Messrs. Parker and Unwin take up the question of lack of thought in architecture in so simple, straightforward and illuminating a fashion that it has seemed wise to present it to the readers of *Craftsman Homes* as expressing our needs and more fully our own ideals!<sup>3</sup>

Stickley's passion for things English is demonstrated by the sheer number of references to English sources which appeared consistently through the magazine. Epigrammatic quotations from Ruskin frequently appear and, as late as 1915,<sup>4</sup> the entire editorial was given over to an extended Ruskin quotation which Stickley prefaced by writing:

For the architectural number of 'The Craftsman' surely no introduction can be more fitting than the following words by one of the world's greatest philosophers and writers upon this important theme. For in them we find expressed our own point of view not only about architecture but about life.