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Year Zero: 1906

A talk given at the Sir John Soane's Museum, 13 February 2019, to celebrate the publication by Machine Books of *Year Zero: 1906*, by Timothy Brittain-Catlin.

<https://itunes.apple.com/us/book/1906/id1444673001?ls=1&mt=11>

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B07KWD64L5>

https://play.google.com/store/books/details/Timothy_Brittain_Catlin_1906?id=Jqh7DwAAQBAJ

The left-hand part of the house you can see here is possibly the first barn conversion in England in the modern sense. It sits on the banks of the Thames at Sutton Courtenay, then in Berkshire, and it was converted in 1912 by the architect Walter Cave for Margot Asquith, the wife of the prime minister H.H. Asquith. Asquith's predecessor Henry Campbell-Bannerman had won a general election by a landslide in January 1906, and initiated one of the most intense periods of progressive legislation that this country has ever seen. Where I'm aiming for in this talk is a description of one of the landmark changes in planning and building legislation, the Housing, Town Planning Act of 1909, enacted when the government was at the height of its powers. And what I want to do is to lead you there by pointing out some of the most distinctive characteristics of the years leading up to it.

Margot Asquith used the barn, which stood outside her new country cottage, as what she called her studio, with a sitting room downstairs and a bedroom upstairs. She was an eccentric person in many ways, but her house tells us a lot about what is going on more generally. The Edwardian period introduced many new types of houses. Barn conversions were one of them, and so were oast houses conversion, which begin to be mentioned in the press around 1905. Like the barn conversions, the best architects were doing these – Reginald Blomfield, whom we know perhaps from the new Regent Street, did one at Godinton in Kent, for example. Another type of new house type that Asquith personally might be connected with is the seaside villa, at for example Folkestone, which she frequently visited, and weekend cottages for golfers and so on. There were new motor houses, rooms in gardens for new purposes, and much else. We are going to return to the barn conversion in a moment.

But there is something much more significant about the Wharf than the fact that it is a barn conversion. It's the fact that a person of some major political status has decided to live in one, even if only, in her case, in a Marie Antoinette sort of way. I want to show you a building that isn't well known, perhaps because it wasn't as pretty as the Wharf or many other of the Liberals' new houses, but in fact is much more significant.

What you can see here is a contemporary postcard of the residence created by the first Earl Carrington in the late 1890s out of an old farmhouse on his estate at Wycombe Abbey in Buckinghamshire. Carrington was a very grand personage – he was Lord Great Chamberlain,

and a close friend of King Edward VII – but he was also a radical liberal with strong views about the need for large landowners, such as himself, to divide their land into fair, lease-held smallholdings, so that more people who lived on the land and through agricultural labour could have a degree of ownership of it and security in it. Much of British politics has been about land ownership and land reform was a central part of Liberal ideology – that is the breaking up of the absolute rights of tenure that the major landowners enjoyed, something that affected so much of life from agricultural tenants all the way through to the prospects of compulsory purchase and ordered town planning in the public interest. Carrington divested himself of one of his large houses, Wycombe Abbey itself, in part as a plan to protect himself against his own party's long-term plans to end favourable conditions for landowners. In 1896 he moved into a small cosy farmhouse in the grounds with the intention of building a new small modern house nearby, but his family liked their temporary home so much they decided to stay there. He then commissioned a district surveyor from London – he was a Progressive member of the London County Council – to turn the old barn, coach house, calving shed and the rest of the farm courtyard into a house. This is a recent view towards the entrance front, which was a new wing that Carrington added, but most of the long axis of agricultural spaces were repurposed, or, as we would now say, adaptively re-used, as a series of grand rooms. As you can see from this old photograph, there is nothing farmhousy about the interior, which was made up from pieces that Carrington brought from his other residences. But nevertheless it is a striking thing to have done. Edward VII visited and said that he liked it very much, as befits a building which says so much about Edwardian domestic architecture.

When you look carefully at Daws Hill you can see surviving old bits of structure poking through. The house wasn't written about in Carrington's lifetime but you what you can see throughout the Edwardian period is an intense interest in the mixture of styles that emerges when old buildings, especially old vernacular buildings from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, are remodelled or even reconstructed with old materials. The place to see this going on was in the magazine *Country Life*, which was founded at the beginning of 1897, just after the *Architectural Review*, but which unlike the *Review* took the time and trouble to be very perceptive about what was going on. *Country Life* supported Carrington's agricultural reforms, especially because it ran a long campaign at the beginning of the Edwardian period to encourage both government and landowners to improve the housing conditions of agricultural workers and thereby also the quality of village life. To the latter end it also encouraged townspeople to move into village houses and restore them for modern use, perhaps as weekend cottages. What is very striking is that *Country Life's* best writers, H. Avray Tipping and Lawrence Weaver, who were enthusiasts for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, actually took a radically different view from SPAB on restoring old buildings. SPAB ideology famously calls for new work to be made distinct from the old. But what Tipping and Weaver liked best was when you couldn't tell what was old and what was new because the synthesis was so complete. To them it was the elements of the old buildings that were the important part, and how the architects recreated or remodelled new parts from the remains of the old, which might be something as small as a baluster or newel post, or as large as a surviving wing. It was the quality of the thing that was so important.

I want to show you an example of a model house of the type that these two very perceptive writers particularly liked. This is Vann, near Hambledon in Surrey, which the architect W.D. Caröe designed for himself in 1907. 1907 is the date of the publication of E.M. Forster's *Howard's End*, and if you saw the recent television adaptation you can see what a brilliant choice it was to set the action here. Forster was talking about an old, probably Tudor house – whereas Caröe's is a combination of the old and the new. In fact it's not really possible to tell what is old and what is new in it because the synthesis is so complete. Part of the wing on the left is mediaeval; it was itself remodelled before the end of the seventeenth century when it was extended off to the left. Caröe rebuilt and extended the house around this core, sometimes moving elements of the old house to new locations, and introducing new ones, to a very high technical and design specification, into it as well. A barn at the back became – after some substantial rebuilding – a billiard room. It's here on the left in the plan that was published in *Country Life's* article on it. This is a big Edwardian family and party house, and over time Caröe modified it further. It's the type of house that the *Country Life* writers admired. In some cases it was good enough for Tipping and Weaver to admire a house where only the old lines of the foundations had been preserved, or where a completely new house had been made from reclaimed materials. It was the elements themselves, the brackets, frames, braces, ornaments, that they admired, and that they repeatedly published in their magazine whether new or Tudor.

Now, there's a further point too, and that is the fact that the Wharf, and the additions to Daws Hill, and the bones of Vann both old and new, *are* essentially Tudor buildings, not Tudor revival or neo-Tudor, all of which are deprecatory descriptions. This gets more to the heart of a very Edwardian Liberal view of the purpose of architecture. The story about the Arts and Crafts movement, the planning of the first real garden cities and suburbs, and the extraordinary career of Edwin Lutyens have distracted us from the fact that the Edwardian period was the Tudor period. Why should this be? On the radical wing of the Liberal Party, David Lloyd George and Charles Masterman both lived in Tudor houses designed by Percy Morley Horder by Walton Heath golf club. What were they after – what did it mean?

I think the reason must be that Tudor architecture is the style of protestant England, and it is the style identified in early nineteenth-century as one in which Englishmen were free and happy, whether that was actually true or not. It is certainly true that it is the style of hospitality, a theme that *Country Life* writers liked to repeat, alongside admiring references to the Netherlands and the similarities in life and design between the two countries. There are after all very few church buildings of any great distinctions from the early sixteenth century to the early seventeenth. What we know from that period are a small number of palatial houses – the prodigy houses – and a very large number of small ones which look as good as they do today because they have been restored, or rebuilt, in many cases by twentieth-century builders who admired them. Secondly, these houses are, generally, characterised by the fact that those elements that Tipping and Weaver admired are very obvious just by looking at them, inside or out. A classical building doesn't show you how it is held up; a good gothic revival building requires an expert builder. A Tudor house on the other hand is a display of individual architectural elements. Its imagery is that of the fit and healthy man, the one with his 'cow and three acres', to quote from a land reform campaign of the 1880s.

And those elements could perhaps have been assembled by the houseowner himself. It is no disservice to the high standards of technical craftsmanship of the Tudor era to say that they look, for most part, as if anyone could have done them. It is thus the architecture of the small holding man, the farmer, the more skilled or more experienced agricultural labourer. That was its attraction. If the primary political aims of the Liberal Party of the time were to share the rights to the land between more of its citizens, each with their own little house – as Carrington’s two Smallholdings and Allotment Acts of 1907 and 1908 promised – then it would be houses like these that would exemplify them. It is very simply a kind of political imagery that anyone can grasp. In the elevated architectural circles of the *Architectural Review*, the Tudor was already going out of fashion by the time that the Liberals came in at the end of 1905. But even then the *Review* liked at first to highlight the personal ornament of the Adam style, its idiosyncratic plasterwork and ironwork.

And thus on to a central plan of land reform as an ideal: town planning, and new houses. In various stages the Liberals addressed the limitations of the building laws – which forced new rural developments to look like Victorian urban terraces – and, through public health and local legislation, the problems of the slums. The early years of the Liberal government were packed with legislation, in some cases, as with Carrington’s smallholding acts, repeatedly tweaking earlier laws to get them right. Elements of public control over plans for new housing began to creep in, not just in privately sponsored local acts, such the ones for the garden cities and suburbs, but also in what look like minor clauses in acts aimed at something else – municipal control in Liverpool, for example, or public health. But tinkering about was not enough.

John Burns, the former trades-unionist president of the Local Government Board, then introduced a comprehensive system of public planning with his Housing, Town Planning Act of 1909. This act first of all abolished the last remaining evils of cheap housebuilding, outlawing back-to-backs and unhealthy basements. Then it established a comprehensive system by which a local authority had the right to draw up a balanced local plan for housing with amenities, for approval by the Board and without private or local legislation. As it happens the opposition spokesman, Alfred Lyttelton, a Liberal Unionist in coalition with the Conservatives, was the president of the trust that was planning the Hampstead Garden Suburb. So the general principle of planning was at precisely that moment in history widely shared across the House of Commons, and thus the debate centred on the approval method and – as often the case when Conservatives were pitted against Liberals – on the path to compulsory purchase. But the act was passed, and only a short time elapsed before it was put into action.

What you are seeing here is a series of views of houses in the garden suburb that sprung up in the aftermath of the new legislation. This is Gidea Park in Romford, in many ways a completely Liberal operation. Its founder was Herbert Raphael MP, from the banking family whose successors run the ATMs at St Pancras station, in case you had ever wondered where that name came from. Raphael had been Carrington’s predecessor as Progressive LCC member for St Pancras, appropriately enough. He bought a large estate called Gidea Hall, in 1906 was elected to parliament in the Liberal landslide. With two other Liberals, the architect-MP John Tudor Walters, Liberal member for Sheffield Brightside, and Charles McCurdy, a director of the Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust (who became a Liberal MP in

1910), he formed a development company to found an estate on the new lines. The idea was to build an exhibition of model houses for sale, 'show houses' in today's parlance, which would mostly cost either £375 or £500, for which prizes would be awarded by a distinguished jury. The plots were sold mostly to architects in partnership with a building contractor, and those wishing to compete for a prize were to submit designs by the end of October 1910, and then to build them at their own expense.

What that means is that the resulting estate was a kind of free-for-all of contemporary ideas about architecture. And nearly all of them were Tudor. Oddly, the first prize winner was a kind of Georgian dolls house, by Geoffry Lucas, but it was very much an exception; another non-Tudor one was by the newcomer Clough Williams-Ellis. The overall standard was extremely high, although not all as high as the pair by M.H. Baillie Scott, which were filled with ornamental textiles and furnishings from Heal's, some designed by himself. Lawrence Weaver in *Country Life* was full of praise.

I think it is in many ways a much more interesting experiment in urban planning than Letchworth or Hampstead, because it is so wild and the ideas so rich and varied. It's not known who did the layout in fact, although it may have been Charles Wade who worked for Parker and Unwin. A comprehensive exhibition guide found something to say about every one of them, sometimes just details about heating or storage, which now included for example bicycle sheds. If you are looking for evidence for the claim that is often made that Edwardian domestic architecture reached an astonishing level of sophistication and technical quality, then you can find it at Gidea Park which is itself an epitome of Edwardian politics and Edwardian design.

One of the wonderful things about the Edwardian period is the way in which ideas in architecture can be seen across all the arts. I'd like to end with one particular aspect of the subjects I have been talking about. You are probably familiar with children's stories of E. Nesbit – *The Railway Children*, *Five Children and It*, and so on. What was so revolutionary about Nesbit's stories at the time was that they had none of the preachiness of the average high Victorian children's story – her own young characters talked wittily and cleverly like adults, and the adults themselves were often badly behaved, or stupid, or indeed in prison like the father in *The Railway Children*. The favourite story in my family was the one called *Harding's Luck*, of 1909, that is, the year of the Housing, Town Planning Act. In this story, Nesbit's hero, young Dickie Harding, is transported backwards and forwards from modern England – from the ugly slums in Deptford where he grew up – to an idealised Jacobean past. The striking thing about this story is that it isn't possible to know which of the two eras, the past or the present, is real, or perhaps they both are; if they both are, then a kind of invented back story has to come into play to explain what happened to Dickie in the past period after the story has ended. When you look at a beautiful cottage like this – this one is by a practice called Unsworth and Triggs near Petersfield – you don't know what is old and what is not. In fact the right-hand half was built from old materials in the Edwardian period and the left-hand wing is relatively new.

It strikes me that this is very close to what the best Edwardian architects were doing, and it is this which is an allegory to Nesbit's stories – or the other way around. You don't know what is old and what is new, and nor does it matter – what matters is the sense of

redemption that bringing the best of the old through to the new could bring. All the time, architects are reinventing the back story, especially when they mixed different seventeenth-century styles in the same new house. And I think that that is the message of 1906, that England's houses and England's architecture were returning – in theory at least – to all of England's people.

With acknowledgments to the residents of the Sutton Courtenay and Petersfield houses who kindly supplied photographs of their houses.

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