

# COUNTRY LIFE<sup>®</sup>

OCTOBER 19, 2011

EVERY WEEK

Inside out:  
taking the  
long view

4 2 >  
9 770045 1885160  
£3.20

## Interior design

New ideas to transform your home  
Bring those old chairs back to life

Plus: the new Bentley and the fun of funghi



The 'uneven wedding cake' terraces of the Iron Age British Camp hill fort rise up majestically behind Perrycroft's gardens

# Curiouser and curiouser

*Perrycroft, Upper Colwall, Herefordshire*

A recently restored house by C. F. A. Voysey is set in reinvigorated gardens that make a virtue of the surreal, 'Alice in Wonderland'-style local geography. Steven Desmond admires its thoughtful re-design

Photographs by Paul Highnam

**T**HE small country house of Perrycroft is no easy place to approach, being situated, like so many houses in the Malvern Hills, on a precipitous slope. Having got there, it's a relief to stand in the level yard at the back of the house and marvel at the feat of engineering that cut a terrace into this steep and unforgiving rock. But it's not until we see the view from the front of the house that the real ingenuity of C. F. A. Voysey's work becomes apparent (the house, built in 1895 for local MP John William Wilson, was described in a recent article by Mary Miers, *COUNTRY LIFE*, July 20, 2011).

Most houses in the Malverns look out from their position on the sierra across the river plains of Worcestershire, or the bumpy, thickly hedged Herefordshire countryside. Conversely, Voysey built on a site that



Steps lined with nepeta and *Alchemilla mollis* lead to the south-western corner of the house

looks out from its advantageous hilltop location, across a valley to an even higher hill: the uneven wedding-cake terraces of the Iron Age hill fort known as British Camp. An endless procession of Sunday walkers files up it with their happy dogs, looking, from Perrycroft, like the bristles on the head of a brush, according to the property's observant owner, Gillian Archer.

This determination on Voysey's part to address the sad-topped peak suggests thorough homework before a stone was laid or a garden contemplated. Perhaps, like John Dobson at Meldon Park in Northumberland in the 1830s, he camped on the site for a fortnight before making his decisions? However he did it, the result is heroic. British Camp looms up like the Sugarloaf in front of Ireland's Powerscourt, only without the intervening lake. A narrow

terrace extends just in front of the main, south-facing, façade, then the land falls away dramatically to a woodland garden.

Nothing is apparently allowed to come between the onlooker and the view, but the long, built-in seat is now handsomely framed in vegetation, as if the house rises from a herbaceous border, with the south-west corner supporting the big leaves and trailing tendrils of *Vitis coignetiae*. The whole buttressed, white-rendered south façade itself is really one great garden feature, not least because of the zingy green of the paintwork, painstakingly matched to Voysey's original. Looking at illustrations of Voysey's houses, which appear to differ little whether they were built in Surrey, the Lakes or here, it is tempting to assume the architect gave scant thought to their appearance in their setting. Think again.

All the main garden ground at Perrycroft drops away sharply from the house, to the west and south. The only exception is a neatly square herb garden on its own terrace just below the house on the west side, handily placed for domestic use and convenient for those who don't wish to go striding about on the slopes. Below it, however, is something much more majestic. A great, topiary-topped hedge, superbly regenerated in recent years by Dr and Mrs Archer and their very capable gardeners, fronts a big, rectangular garden entered through just the sort of garden gate we might expect from a meticulous dictator like Voysey, who wished to control every aspect of use for his obliging clients.

Once in the garden, we are in a separate world, and a surprising one, full of contradictions. Voysey appears to have roughed ➤

out the pattern of this space, complete with old-world topiary, on the site plan. On that plan, it must have looked quite conventional to the client. The lawn is neatly divided by a central walk, with square, box-edged beds arranged in a simple, regular pattern across a lawn. Abstract topiary in big chunks of yew accompanies the walker on the path. Deep, straight borders run down either perimeter, filled with shrubs. The outer hedge frames three sides, with a stone wall across the foot, suggesting that this was perhaps intended as a kitchen garden, a little like a smaller version of William Burges's monster potager at Knightshayes in Devon. If all this were roughly level, it would resemble the sort of scheme outlined in waffly prose by John Dando Sedding in his half-baked, but influential, book of garden style, *Garden-Craft Old and New*, newly published just as Perrycroft began to rise from its foundations in the early 1890s. This is the sort of old-world pleasaunce that appears in Sedding's golden pipe dream.

## 6 The whole garden is invested with an air of improbability,

But how different is the reality. Where the house is neatly seated on its level platform, this garden descends steeply on a powerful slope. The main fall is to the south, but the slope twists in a cross-fall to the west. The whole garden is invested with an 'Alice in Wonderland' air of improbability, confirmed by the view from the bottom, where the level roofline of the house contrasts crazily with the various slopes within the garden. I felt like advising the gardener working in one of the beds to wear a safety harness.

The present state of harmonious maturity is deceptive. When the present owners



**Above** The level roof of Perrycroft contrasts eccentrically with the various slopes within the garden. **Preceding pages** The serene woodland and water garden below the house

arrived in 1999, the picture was very different, following years of bumptious recreational exercise by the Boys' Brigade. The framing hedges have all been at least regenerated, the topiary replanted along Voyseyesque lines, and the planting made new. Dr and Mrs Archer have understood the character of the garden without pretending to re-create what might have been there before: the beds and borders are now filled with a burgeoning array of shrubs and perennials, with constant adjustments made where a planting scheme turns out to be too thin or too brim-full. Like all good gardens, this is an ongoing project that can never be finished.

The steep drop on the southern side is treated entirely differently. A winding path snakes gently down through a wildflower pasture full of lovely things shining in the morning sun to a cool woodland garden in the shade of big trees, the remnants of

an arboretum. Most of these trees are ideal for the present purpose, providing just the right mix of light and shade, but one or two are beginning to intrude on the key view of British Camp from the house. This is where the hard thinking begins. Down in the dell, whence the house is invisible, all is refreshment. A natural spring of constant flow is formed into a pool, crossed by a boardwalk bridge to an elegantly silhouetted seat. The flora here is partly natural—meadowsweet, yellow flag, violets and ferns beneath the trees, with spotted orchids appearing here and there—and partly planted in this ideal setting. This is the world of *Geranium* and *Euphorbia* under *Hydrangea* and *Spiraea*, luxuriating in an improved version of their native woods and valleys. With any luck, there will be poor mobile-phone reception down here.

The chief pleasure of Perrycroft will always be, as Voysey intended, the grand view of British Camp, to the south, which is conversely the only place from which the house and garden can be seen, and then from a distance, in its noble setting. The owners have carefully and appropriately revived the great man's spirit here, without creating a museum, and are not afraid to add new features in his manner, such as a yew hedge with leaning buttresses behind a garden seat based on those built into the walls of the house. From what we know of Voysey, his smile may have been rather thin, but it was there, and it lives on at lovely Perrycroft. 🐦

*Perrycroft, Jubilee Drive, Upper Colwall, Malvern. The garden opens for an afternoon in June for the National Gardens Scheme charities ([www.ngs.org.uk](http://www.ngs.org.uk)) and also by prior appointment*



The slope continues to rise on the north side, with areas given over to a wildflower meadow